

## **Waving Goodbye to the Dinosaurs? Women, Electoral Politics, and Peace in Northern Ireland**

When negotiators for Peace Talks in the Northern Ireland Forum returned from their St. Patrick's Day visit to the United States, they learned that Senator George Mitchell had set a deadline of April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1998 for reaching a decision. Jane Wilde and Bronagh Hinds took the lead in the negotiations process for the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, a non-sectarian party hastily assembled seven weeks before the elections to the Forum out of frustration that women, once again, would be left out as men negotiated the future of Northern Ireland. Wilde and Hinds feared that the Northern Ireland Office (NIO—The British Government's department overseeing Northern Ireland) and other parties had sidelined their interests in the talks. At a meeting with their liaison from the NIO, Hinds threw down the gauntlet. The issues that brought their party into existence: a desire for an election system that ensured women's representation, a Civic Forum, and a commitment to inclusion, equality and human rights were not negotiable. Without these items in the final document, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition could not sign. Hinds's threat got the attention of the Northern Ireland Office and surprised even Wilde. What was the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition's bottom line? If their whole *raison d'être* was inclusion, supporting the peace process, respectfully listening, and compromising, and if they had argued that women brought something unique to the negotiation process—their ability to mediate and eschew tantrums, could they have been intransigent and just quit like their nemesis, Ian Paisley and the Democratic Unionist Party? But if they could not prevail on any of their core issues, could they have legitimated an agreement by signing it?

### **Background: Northern Ireland**

The partition of Ireland in 1921 resulted in the formation of the Irish Free State and later the Republic in the southern part of the island. The Irish Constitution created a Republic in which Catholicism was the official state religion as the Church of England was the state religion in the United Kingdom. Six counties of Ulster remained part of the United Kingdom, with a devolved

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regional government dominated by unionists as Northern Ireland. A majority of the population in the North were Protestant and (mostly) unionist, wanting to remain British. A significant minority were Catholic and (mostly) nationalist, wanting to become part of a united Ireland or at least, have recognition of their Irish identity.<sup>1</sup> Extreme distrust had long divided both communities (Hinds 2003, 386). A period known as “The Troubles” began in the late 1960s. Modeling their demands on the civil rights movement in the United States and even going so far as to sing “We Shall Overcome” at their marches, Catholics (and their allies) advocated for an end to discrimination in housing, employment, and politics. The police and the British army met their protests with extreme violence, most notoriously on Bloody Sunday where British troops opened fire on unarmed marchers killing thirteen in January of 1972. Paramilitaries from both communities committed numerous acts of violence, and the Irish Republican Army took the bombing campaign to the British mainland, most famously bombing the Conservative Party Conference in 1984. In a province of 1.7 million people, thirty years of sectarian violence killed 3,600 people and wounded thousands more. Virtually no one in Northern Ireland in any community was untouched by violence. In 1972, the British Government suspended the unionist dominated local government at Stormont and instituted direct rule from Westminster (the British Parliament in London).

Direct rule meant rule by bureaucrat via the Northern Ireland Office and government by quangos (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations) producing a democratic deficit in many ways, only one of which was along gender lines. Because genuine power was only rarely and intermittently held by elected assembly members rather than bureaucrats, a petitioner mentality similar to children turning to parents for everything developed. Feminists, like everyone else, found it hard to imagine creating or sustaining institutions independently of governmental support. Everyone turned to bureaucrats to solve problems, shrugging their shoulders helplessly if they found them unresponsive. But they carefully monitored all the spoils

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<sup>1</sup> At partition, the population was 66% Protestant and 33% Catholic. Some commentators think the current population consists of 50% Protestants, 45% Catholics, and 4% other. David McKittrick, “Protestants Stand on the Brink of Losing their Majority in Northern Ireland,” *Independent*, February 11, 2002, <http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/ulster/story.jsp?story=119350>. Neither community is a political monolith on the constitutional issue or anything else. The terms republicans and nationalists are often used interchangeably, although republican denotes the IRA’s loyalty to the first Irish Republic while nationalist connotes more the Catholic population’s desire for recognition of its Irish identity. Similarly, on the protestant side, loyalist and unionist are often used interchangeably, although loyalists are seen as more extreme and devoted to the crown while unionists are protestants who want to remain part of Britain. Although Northern Ireland Catholics united in wanting recognition of their identity and an end to discrimination, not all uniformly favour mere absorption in the Irish Republic because they fear a violent reaction from loyalists, because they prefer to live in a more generous welfare state, or for other reasons.

government doled out and riots ensued if “one side” was getting more than “their” share.

Appointment, rather than election, however, brought more women into public service.

Expressly designed to be free of sectarianism and to ensure the efficient administration of public housing, education, health and the personal social services, besides monitoring the implementation of legislation to combat sex and religious discrimination, these bodies are invested with great symbolic, as well as practical, significance. Their membership is determined by the Northern Ireland Office, whose successive ministerial teams have used their powers of patronage to the benefit of women. Between 1991 and 1995, for instances, the proportion of women serving on the provinces’ 128 nominated bodies increased from 25% to 32%. Appointment, rather than election, has proved a surer route to numerical representation (Wilford 1996, 48).

The Irish Republican Army (IRA), The Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the Ulster Defense Association (UDA) and their offshoots—the alphabet soup of paramilitary organizations—was matched by a splintered array of political parties very different from the British mainland’s partisan politics. On the unionist side was the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the largest unionist party since 2003, founded in 1970 by the famous Reverend Ian Paisley. The DUP opposed any agreement. As a Member of the European Parliament, “big Ian” as he is known in Northern Ireland, had called the invited guest in Strasbourg, the Pope, “the antichrist.” He represented intransigent unionism. The Ulster Unionist Party was the largest unionist party until 2003 and represented middle-class and relatively more moderate unionism. The Progressive Unionist Party and UK Unionist Parties were much smaller. In the middle on the constitutional issue were an array of non-sectarian parties that tried to work across religion: the Alliance, the largest non-sectarian party, the Labour and Conservative Parties, the Green Party, and others. Representing the Catholic community were Sinn Fein, formerly the political wing of the IRA, led since the mid-1980s by Gerry Adams. Since 2001, Sinn Fein was the largest nationalist party. The Social Democratic and Labour Party, the moderate and non-violent Catholic party, was formerly led by John Hume.

In 1985, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement, giving the Irish government a consultative role in the governance of the North for the first time in exchange for increased co-operation on security in order to stop Republican violence (McEvoy and Morison 2003, 990). In the 1990s Sinn Fein began a political strategy that was accompanied by the IRA renouncing violence and decommissioning its weapons. The election of a Labour Government in Britain in 1997 committed to major constitutional reform strengthened the peace process that began in 1993 with ceasefires. It included devolution (that is, shifting governmental decision making from the center to the regions, in the case of the UK, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) and the passage of a Human Rights Act. Much changed in

Northern Ireland in the 1990s. Not just the bombs stopped, but the police stations started to look less like Fallujah. Cars could park downtown; each shop no longer had a security guard to search for weapons. Restaurants opened and residents enjoyed a nightlife. Although the Berlin wall fell, Belfast was still a divided city with “ethnically cleansed” neighborhoods of over 90% one community and where Orwellianly named “peace walls” divided working class neighborhoods. Dramatic murals of hooded gunmen still proclaim allegiances and mark the fallen.

Changes at the international level enhanced the prospect for peace in Northern Ireland. Since 1973, the United Kingdom had worked with the Irish Government as part of the European Union, eliminating barriers to trade, developing common social and economic policies, and working on foreign policy goals. Significantly, the European Union poured money into ameliorating the Northern Ireland conflict. Both countries are members of the Council of Europe, and the European Court of Human Rights had ruled against the British Government on several important security issues in Northern Ireland. (The ECHR’s rulings also forced the Republic to recognize broader human rights.) The Cold War ended as did apartheid in South Africa and the peace and reconciliation process began. President Bill Clinton took a keen interest in the peace process. International actors from South African lawyer Brian Currin, who helped with the issue of release of political prisoners, to Chris Patten, former Hong Kong governor who worked on policing, to Canadian General De Chastelain who worked on decommissioning of IRA weapons, participated in the process. International ideas and institutions such as human rights and greater equality for women, not just actors from elsewhere shaped the 1990s environment in Northern Ireland, and created a climate more conducive to human rights, equality, and participatory democracy (Meehan forthcoming 2006).

### **Proportional Representation (set this section aside as a separate box or appendix)**

The choice of electoral system—the rules of the game—shapes electoral outcomes in important albeit complex ways. In the United States, most jurisdictions use a single member constituency, that is to say, only one person is elected from each electoral unit, the constituency, and they are elected by a first-past-the-post system. To win, a candidate need only secure more votes than anyone else, no matter how small a percentage of the total votes that is. For example if three candidates are running for mayor and they split the vote evenly, the mayor will be elected with only 34% of the vote rather than a majority of votes cast. Some political scientists celebrate such systems as useful because they produce legislative majorities capable of governing because they magnify a small electoral plurality and make it a legislative majority—most notably in the United Kingdom’s Parliament at Westminster. (In 2005, the Labour Party won 324 of the 646—roughly 50%—seats in the House of Commons despite polling only 36% of the popular vote,

equating to approximately 22% of the electorate.) But others criticize such systems as bad for representative democracy. Take for example the city of Minneapolis in Minnesota, which has single member constituencies and uses a first-past-the-post system. A significant majority support the Democratic Farmer Labor Party (DFL). All elected representatives from that area will be from the DFL, despite the fact that a strong minority may be Republicans. Similarly, such systems skew the representation of other minority groups. African-Americans may only succeed in electing one of their own to Congress if electoral districts are drawn to create a so-called majority-minority district with a majority of African-American voters. Drawing electoral boundaries in such a way has the virtue of creating winnable seats for African-American legislators by draining surrounding districts of African-American voters who could insist that their elected officials address their issues. Paradoxically, Black members of Congress may at last arrive in Washington, only to find few allies.

Systems of proportional representation aim to have the result of elections more closely resemble the proportion of votes, usually with respect to political party. Thirty percent of all voters could vote for the Green Party, for example, without having one single Green legislator. The systems differ in how they do this. One way is by having multi-member constituencies. To return to the Minneapolis example, if it used proportional representation, and had five-member constituencies, a likely result would be three DFL legislators, one Green, and one Republican. The simplest way to do this, after creating multi-member constituencies, is to ask voters to rank their choices. Such a system allows people to register their true preferences without penalty of wasting their vote. In the 2000 U.S. presidential election, many voters would have preferred an alternative vote system that let them register their preference for Ralph Nader without, in effect, voting for George Bush, because they could have voted for Nader first, Gore second, and Bush third.

Counting the votes is where many become confused. To count votes in a proportional representation system is more complicated than a first-past-the-post single-member-constituency system where you simply see who has the most votes and declare her elected. Under a PR system, you sort each ballot according to the first preferences and establish a threshold or quota for electing each member. Once someone is over that quota, their votes are redistributed on a pro-rata scale. And the person who received the lowest number of first preference ballots are redistributed at full value until another person is above the quota, and so on until the five, or whatever number, are elected. Whether or not it is easy to count, such a system of proportional representation allows people to not only vote their true preferences, but express a wider degree of preferences. Those elected are the consensus choices of all, each voter's least bad outcome.

A system of proportional representation has great value in Northern Ireland. Assume for a moment, one is a devoted sectarian voter. Under a first-past-the-post single member constituency system, the voter has to calculate which party stands the best chance to win. Assuming one were an ardent unionist, you would not want to vote for the Ulster Unionists instead of the Democratic Unionists if you feared you would split the unionist vote and therefore allow Sinn Fein to take the seat. Similarly, you would not want to vote your true preference for the Social Democratic and Labor Party if it meant you would split the nationalist vote and let in the Democratic Unionists. And of course, if you support the Alliance Party, or another very small party, casting your vote may feel like wasting it altogether if your candidate has no chance of winning the majority. But if you have an alternative vote system (the proportional representation system where only one person is elected per constituency), you could vote your first preference for the Alliance Party, your second choice for the SDLP, and your third choice for the Ulster Unionists, taking a stand for moderation and non-violence. If you are a Nationalist, you can vote your first preference for Sinn Fein and your second vote for the SDLP. If you are a Unionist, you could vote your first choice DUP, and your second choice, UUP, and your third choice, the Alliance, with Sinn Fein last. The first-past-the post single member constituency system in Northern Ireland has clearly strengthened the extremes. The result has been elected officials with no desire or political motivation to compromise. The middle is vanquished. Many elections have used some form of proportional representation (elections to the European Parliament, the Forum, the Assembly but NOT Westminster) to eliminate this polarizing effect.

### **Women and Feminist Politics in Northern Ireland**

Northern Ireland has been historically inhospitable to feminism. At the height of the violence Northern Ireland was what Cathy Harkin, a women's aid worker in Derry called "armed patriarchy" (McWilliams 1995, 5).<sup>2</sup> "Its politicians, almost all male, display the worst in masculine combativeness towards each other and disdain towards women" (Cockburn 2003, 78). The violence and constitutional issues have squeezed out other issues. Refusing to identify oneself on the constitutional question created the same sort of discomfort viewers of the famed Saturday Night Live skit felt when they could not identify the character Pat's gender. Numerous versions of the same story exist. Green Party candidate in the 2005 elections, John Barry, reported that even if one stood for the Green Party, voters wanted to know, "were you an orange (meaning unionist) green or a green (meaning nationalist) green. Another version of the apocryphal anecdote demanded to know whether you are a Protestant or a Catholic Jew.

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<sup>2</sup> For a broader historical overview of the challenges of feminism in Ireland North and South, see Ward 1999.

Although virulent unionists had contempt for the Republic of Ireland's constitutionally enshrined Catholic values, many of the same views of women and women's place held among unionists. The British Parliament extended divorce reform in Northern Ireland ten years after doing so in England; the British Parliament's 1967 abortion law did not apply to Northern Ireland where abortion is illegal, and the culture is pronatalist, perhaps exacerbated by anxieties about shifts between majority and minority. (Northern Ireland had the highest birthrate in the European Union and low levels of female economic activity [Wilford 1999, 74]). Parliament only introduced legislation to decriminalize homosexuality in Northern Ireland after the European Commission on Human Rights ruled against it and domestic violence legislation as introduced protected only married women but not cohabitees (McWilliams 1995, 18). The provision of publicly funded childcare was the worst in the UK (Wilford 1996, 46) and among the worst in Europe (McWilliams 1995, 14), despite the fact that Northern Ireland had the highest birthrate in the European Union (Wilford 1999, 74). "The churches in Ulster—Protestant as well as Catholic—still dominate education, social services, family life, and community identity" (Ryder 2002, 45).

Prior to 2001 when voters elected three women to Parliament: Sylvia Hermon (Ulster Unionist), Michelle Gildernew (Sinn Féin) and Iris Robinson (DUP), only three women had ever been elected to Westminster from one of the 18 seats in Northern Ireland, and two of those were elected before 1964 (Brown et al. 2002, 76). No woman had been elected since the British Government suspended the Northern Ireland Parliament (Stormont) in 1972. In 1997, when women swept into Parliament, Northern Ireland had the dubious distinction of being the only province without women in its delegation, despite the fact that 20 women (12%) were elected to the Irish Dail (its Parliament) (Wilford 1999, 77). Both Hermon and Gildernew were reelected in 2005 and women hold two of eighteen seats. In its fifty-year existence, only nine women had ever served in the Northern Ireland Parliament (Ryder 2002, 44). Women had done increasingly well at the local level, in part because local elections had used a single transferable vote/proportional representation system since 1977, and perhaps more obviously, because local councils had little power under direct rule. Between 1977 and 1997, the percentage of women elected at the local level doubled to 14% (Cowell-Meyers 2001). Politics for women was, as they say here, with a small 'p'—rather than engaging in political parties, women worked in the voluntary sector, organizing community centers or non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The second wave of the women's movement in Northern Ireland was slower to get off the ground than elsewhere and fundamentally shaped by the constitutional divide (Hill 2002).<sup>3</sup> "[I]t is more apparent now that there was no such thing as one women's movement but a whole range of movements in which women had participated" (McWilliams 1995, 17). The Coleraine Women's Group began in 1974. In 1975, Bronagh Hinds, the first woman president of Queen's University's Student Union, convened the Women's Action Group that evolved into the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement (NIWRM) (Fearon 1999, 3). Both reflected the origins of the movement in the experiences of women from civil rights, trade-unionist, and broad left backgrounds (Roulston 3). An important first effort to focus on women's concerns outside of the constitutional issue was to successfully contest the government's view that the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 did not need to be extended to Northern Ireland because there was no demand for such legislation by women. Out of this campaign, came the Equal Opportunities Commission Northern Ireland (EOCNI), a quasi-independent governmental agency that provided institutional support to second wave feminism. The EOCNI (now the Equality Commission NI) not only worked effectively to combat employment discrimination, but it added its institutional authority for the demand for a greater role for women in public life. The NIWRM also opened a Women's Centre in Belfast in 1980; by that point, the radical feminists of Women's Aid and the Socialist Women's Group had spun off into separate groups (Evason 1991, 23).

In addition to all the conflicts that plagued second-wave feminists elsewhere, women in Northern Ireland struggled with the constitutional issue. Derry Women's Aid, founded in 1975 to combat domestic violence, viewed all military organizations similarly as subjugating women. The founding of Women's Aid in and of itself was a significant accomplishment because the dominant frame was on political violence, not domestic violence. Women Against Imperialism, formed in 1978, (whose members included Bernadette Devlin, elected to Parliament as a Republican Socialist at the age of 21 in 1969), stressed the primacy of the nationalist issue. These women organized on behalf of prisoners and prisoners' families, and particularly, republican women prisoners in Armagh prison (Aretxaga 1997). Such groups made it hard for groups such as Belfast Women's Collective, which wanted to work on republican issues as well as broader feminist issues, to operate and they ultimately dissolved (McWilliams 1995, 27). Protestant women complained that they felt excluded because they did not want to work on behalf of republican women prisoners. The linkage, whether actual or perceived, between feminism and

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<sup>3</sup> The constitutional question means whether Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom or become part of the Republic of Ireland, or some alternative in between. The population not only divides as to what the outcome should be but how the decision should be made. If the population decides, is it the population of Northern Ireland, all of the Ireland? The United Kingdom?



republicanism, dogged the movement (Miller, Wilford, and Donoghue 1996, 218) and re-emerged as a criticism of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition.

Despite rocky and fractious beginnings, a "quiet growth of a wide range of voluntary bodies organized by and for women" occurred—"rape crisis centres, legal advice centres, refuges, mother and toddler groups" all organized across the sectarian divide (Wilford 1996, 49). The first women's center in Belfast opened in 1979, one of the most important achievements of the women's movement (Hill 2002, 18). Ruth Taillon documented 197 organizations as of 1992. Much of the activism of the women's movement in Northern Ireland was by working-class women (McWilliams 1995, 17). The Women's Support Network, a loose network of community women's centers, began an innovative project in the early 1990s called "Women Into Politics" coordinated by Joanne Vance (Cockburn 2003, 78). The organization started as a forum for women to talk politics and developed into trainings for women who wanted to enter the electoral arena. The community groups of women began joining networks with their counterparts elsewhere, in the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and the United Nations.

Feminism in the 1980s and 1990s turned away from the fractious ideological politics of the 1970s, where all had to align not just across a liberal-socialist-radical divide, but on the constitutional issues, toward what Yuval-Davis has called "transversal politics." Transversal politics requires rooting and shifting. Each participant in a dialogue or coalition is rooted in her own membership and identity but committed to active engagement with "the Other." The goal of shifting is not unity, homogeneity, or resolution, but rather movement, finding compatible goals and some issues that different women can work on together. Participants are committed to a process of active listening (Cockburn 2003, 9; Meyer 2003). Such transversal politics was evidenced in the way women's centers in different communities supported each other and worked together. When a unionist local council wanted to cut funding to the Falls Road Women's Centre, for example, because of its nationalist positions and therefore alleged connections with IRA terrorists, the Shankill Road Women's Centre, a unionist bastion, came to its defense (Aretxaga 1997, 177). Out of these networks emerged the Women's Support Network. Transversal politics occurred both at the very grassroots level of community work and women's centers as well at the international level. In 1994, a republican grouping of women, Clar na mBan held a conference that produced a report, "A Woman's Agenda". In 1995, a collective managed by the Women's Resources Development Agency, on behalf of the funder, the EOCNI, produced "Women and Citizenship in Northern Ireland: Power: Participation, and Choice" (cited in Brown et al. 2002, 77). A conference organized by the University of Ulster's Centre for Research on

Women in Draperstown entitled “Women, the Framework and the Future” sought to develop a strategy for increasing women’s political participation, and garnered support from both the Northern Ireland Office and High Profile women. Monica McWilliams and Elizabeth Porter co-authored the conference report. They were particularly inspired by women’s success in the new Scottish Parliament and discussed a requirement for 50-50 representation men and women (Hinds 1998).

The Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform was an umbrella organization of women’s groups. It sought to “ensure that women in Northern Ireland contributed to the debates on women’s concerns at local, regional, national, European and international levels.”<sup>4</sup> At the international level, it had UN Consultative Status and made representations on CEDAW. At the European Union Level, it was a member of the European Women’s Lobby. At the Vienna Conference in 1994 to prepare for the 1995 Beijing meeting, women from the North and South of Ireland created a joint statement embodying the UN view that the access of women to decision making was critically important to achieving and underpinning peace as well as securing equality and development (Hinds 1998, 110).

The election of Mary Robinson, an outspoken feminist and human rights lawyer, as President of Ireland in 1990 fostered improved cross-border collaboration among women. Women organized a major conference in Dublin, with the support of the U.S. Ambassador to Ireland, Jeanne Kennedy Smith, entitled “Women Shaping the Future Political Economic and Social Development on the Island of Ireland” which attracted 200 women from North and South and debated the need for funding of the women’s voluntary sector, childcare and equality policies, and positive action to increase women’s political representation (Hinds 1998). Kennedy Smith had sent Northern Irish women to the U.S. to network with feminists there (Walsh 2001, 113). The Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform and the National Women’s Council of Ireland made a joint submission to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Dublin in January of 1995 sponsored by the Irish Government that “any new political future had to be built on comprehensive equality among all people, including equality between men and women” (Hinds 1998, 109). The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing provided an opportunity for Northern Ireland feminists to come together across difference and to develop position papers as a delegation (Hinds, Hope and Whitaker 1997). The conference yielded a network as well as position statements on issues. “The ideas and views presented at Beijing represented years or work and organization on the ground in Northern Ireland and were repeatedly aired by women in a variety of fora, including the Opsahl Commission” (Hinds 1998, 110).

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.niwep.org.uk/#AIMS>

### **Other efforts to cross the sectarian divide**

In August of 1976, a soldier had shot dead a Provisional IRA man in a car which then careened off and killed three young children in Andersontown. Betty Williams witnessed the killing and, after viewing the television coverage, started a peace petition that garnered the signatures of over 6,000 women. Mairead Corrigan then invited Williams to the children's funeral. Corrigan announced a peace march the next day that drew 10,000 women. Dubbed "the Peace Women" they became the "Peace People" when men joined their cause, but gender and an association of women with non-violence remained. Peace marches were held every weekend through 1976 and Corrigan and Williams were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977, but the movement had already disintegrated over differences about class, informing on paramilitaries, failure to condemn the violence perpetrated by the security forces, and the allocation of the Nobel Prize money (Wilford 1996, 49). The initial appeal, if not the constant frame of the group, was not just gendered, but maternal. Women came together outside of politics as not just the excluded, but a moral force for change. As Corrigan said, "I believe it is time for the women to have a go and see what the women of both sides, working together, can do."<sup>5</sup>

Northern Ireland has never lacked what Robert Putnam calls "social capital," the ability of networks within the community to get things done. What it has lacked has been bridging social capital, networks of community work that spanned the sectarian divide. The British Government responded to the beginning of the Troubles by establishing a Community Relations Commission to develop strategies to improve relationships between the two communities. The Government hoped to counter the dominance of the Orange Order, the civil rights movement, and the churches. The European Union also put money into the development of community groups. After the suspension of inter-party talks in November of 1992, an independent citizen's group called Initiative '92 was formed to give voice to the people of Northern Ireland feeling helpless and impotent after nearly a quarter century of political violence and deadlock. A Commission sat from 1992-1993 to hear community views on the way forward. Its members included leaders from Ireland and Britain (including Ruth Lister, a well-known theorist on gender and social policy and gender and citizenship) and Professor Torkel Opsahl from Norway chaired it.

The Opsahl commission was not just comprehensive, allowing more than 3,000 people to give testimony, but it was "one of the few initiatives that provided the possibility for women to be heard" (Hinds 1998). "As a result the wider community began to have greater confidence in putting forward its views and engaging with the political process and politicians from whom it

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted I P. Bew and G. Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles, 1968-1993*. Gill and Macmillan, 1994, cited by Wilford 1996, 48.

had felt alienated for so long” (McCartney). The vibrancy and complexity of women’s participation in community life outside of conventional electoral politics became obvious, as did their exclusion from politics. The final report legitimated women’s community role as well as the importance of women’s groups in particular (Pollack 1993, 119, 322). It emboldened women as well to see new possibilities for political engagement and called for the political parties to set targets to increase women’s representation. Soon after the Commission reported, women organized a conference on its findings in Dublin. Women in both the Republic and the North demanded to know how women were to be included in the peace process (Hinds 1998). Opsahl and the weight and quality of submissions it received were testament to the potential of a more deliberative and participatory discussion of the future of the region. It set up working groups to begin to implement its recommendations. Women were particularly inspired by the success of the African National Congress in securing women’s electoral representation as part of constitutional reform in South Africa.

### **The Formation of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition**

“The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition can be seen as a direct descendant of the work undertaken by women in the 1990s to gain access to shaping their future” (Hinds 1998). In 1996, almost two-thirds of women respondents to a survey wished to see more women in Parliament and on local councils (as opposed to half of men) and reported widespread disillusion with the parties. When asked which of the parties best served the interests of women, almost two-thirds of the women answered none (an opinion shared by fewer than half of the men) and the same proportions thought the region’s parties did not give women the opportunity to enter politics (Wilford 1996, 51).

Women of all political persuasions and none were critical of the tendency of male politicians to ignore everyday problems, commonly citing education, the health service, childcare, unemployment and the care of the elderly as issues that languished below the high politics of the constitutional question” (Wilford 1996, 55).

In February of 1996, the British and Irish governments issued a Joint Communiqué announcing the setting up of All Party Talks to determine the future of Northern Ireland. The elections of May 30, 1996 were for delegates to the peace talks and to the Northern Ireland Forum which ran in parallel with the two-year talks process. Elections would determine who participated in these talks, and the governments asked for suggestions for the method to be used for the election. On March 19<sup>th</sup>, the Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform (NIWEP) responded with a paper entitled “Genderproofing the Election System and Talks Fora” (NIWC 5). By genderproofing, the NIWEP meant equalizing the chance of men and women being selected as candidates. The NIWEP called for extending the concept of ‘parity of esteem’ between the

two communities to parity of esteem between men and women. The Northern Ireland's Women's European Platform had called for parity of representation in party lists, the provision of childcare allowances for elected representatives, and family friendly hours (Hinds 1998). Only Sinn Fein, the Democratic Left, and Michael Ancram, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, responded to the paper (McGilloway 1996, 8). In late March, the government's published proposals favored a system using designated political parties and a list system, a form of proportional representation (but not alternating men and women, as the NIWEP had proposed). "Each of the 18 new constituencies elected five representatives from closed party lists using the d'Hondt formula. In addition, each of the ten parties with the most votes across Northern Ireland elected another two representatives. The total number of potential delegates/Forum members was thus 110" (<http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/ff96.htm>).

The fear that women would be left out of the negotiations galvanized three women community leaders into action: Monica McWilliams, a Women's Studies lecturer at Ulster University whose research on domestic violence had made her a prominent figure in the women's movement, Avila Kilmurry, a longtime activist in the women's rights movement and the director of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, and Bronagh Hinds, director of the Ulster People's College and chair of the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (Fearon 1999, 8; Ryder 2002, 45).

The Northern Ireland Office had not included any of the provisions the NIWEP urged on them to include more women, and, because time was short, it had designated the fifteen parties that would participate rather than permitting all parties who wanted to participate to register (McGilloway 1996, 9-10). The NIWEP then wrote a second paper, "Designation of Parties for the Forthcoming Election in Northern Ireland: a response by NIWEP on behalf of women in Northern Ireland," urging the government to include women on its lists and space for a women's network or caucus. The second paper drew in four additional politically committed women: Margaret Logue, head of the Derry Women's Centre, Kate Fearon, past president of Queen's University's Student Union and then an assistant director of Democratic Dialogue, a think tank, Kathleen Feenan of the Women's Information Group, and May Blood (now Baroness Blood), director of the Shankill Women's Forum and 38-year veteran of the Blackstaff textile mill and a shop steward. These founding feminists sent a letter to over 200 groups of women, included both papers, and called them to a meeting to discuss what could be done to ensure that women were represented at the Forum (Roulston 10). The Government surprised them by responding positively and asking to know the name of the women's party to meet legislative deadlines. They provisionally registered the name Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. In the end, thirty parties

were registered. By not restricting who could contest the election to entities previously legally registered as political parties, the Government dramatically expanded who would participate.<sup>6</sup>

In a packed Ulster People's College Conference Hall on April 17, 1996, the participants debated. Some women opposed a gender-specific party and the grounds that "we are not just women" or that deploying gender as a unifying category would render invisible other important differences. For some, it was immoral to remain neutral on the constitutional issue. Still others opposed contesting this particular election. Many feminists still believed any engagement with mainstream electoral politics was irretrievably compromised. In the end, the majority decided to contest the election to the Forum and try to secure a place at the talks and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was born. By May 4<sup>th</sup>, the NIWC had opened offices in Belfast, Derry, and Enniskillen. It placed ads in newspapers encouraging women to come forward as candidates. Its manifesto centered on three principles: inclusion, equality, and human rights, drawing heavily on the fourteen policy and briefing papers the NIWEP had prepared for the Beijing Conference. Its slogan was "Wave Goodbye Dinosaurs." Although longtime feminists were the backbone of the NIWC—the planning group drew heavily on the NIWEP, the Centre for Research on Women, Derry Women's Centre, Democratic Dialogue, the Women's Information Group, and Shankill Women's Forum (Wilford 1999, 89)—many feminists and women's groups maintained a distant relationship. Some openly disagreed; others felt their employment at a publicly-funded organization precluded them from taking a public political position.

The NIWC held open policy meetings on Wednesday nights and administrative meetings on Saturdays with Bronagh Hinds as Campaign Manager and meeting chair. The process, utilizing the best of transversal politics, was important to all participants and helped the group cohere around a consensus (Haley and Hinds 2003, 392). At the first administrative policy meeting on April 20<sup>th</sup>, Sydney Elliot, a Queen's University political scientist specializing in election forecasting, explained what they would need based on the recent council elections. Ten thousand votes for the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition would likely ensure them two seats. One hundred women candidates needed to get only 100 votes each. Suddenly, it all seemed manageable (Fearon 1999, 10-11). By the filing date, the NIWC had seventy candidates (all women), the largest number of women candidates to ever contest an election in Northern Ireland, and the fifth biggest slate of any party. The two-tiered electoral system, and absence of a

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<sup>6</sup> It was widely believed that the 1990/91 peace talks had failed because they had only included the constitutional parties, not the paramilitary organizations. The goal of the current talks was to include everyone (Donaghy 2002, 29). Walsh describes the NIWC's move from grassroots politics into the political process as "sheer political opportunism....It is ironic that a mechanism designed to admit the 'men of violence' should also have opened the way for the entry of very different oppositional voices into the Talks process" (2001, 114).

deposit,<sup>7</sup> and the importance of the peace process drew a record number of candidates standing, but the other parties did not accept the challenge of standing women. The parties ranged in the number of women candidates: second to the NIWC at 100% was the Green Party with 41%. Sinn Fein had 32% and the UUP a paltry 9%. But what was most important was the number of women candidates placed number one on a constituency list, where she had the greatest chance of being elected. The NIWC, of course, had 100%; the Alliance Party and Sinn Fein had 3%, and the UUP only 1% (McGilloway 1996, 18). Only Sinn Fein, the Democratic Left, the Conservative Party, and the NIWC placed a woman first on their regional lists. The DUP's highest ranking woman on its regional list, for example, was eighth. The NIWC calculated only seven women in other parties were well placed. In many constituencies, for example such as Foyle, NIWC candidates could credibly claim if voters did not vote for them no women would be returned from that constituency.

The top two candidates on the regional list were Monica McWilliams, who had been designated Party Leader, and Pearle Sagar, who was a community worker involved in many organizations and on the management committee of the Women's Information Group. Both were married with children. A survey showed that of the NIWC candidates, 45% were Catholic and 28% Protestant. Seventy percent of the women were either university graduates or had a professional qualification. The average age was 43 and the average family size was 3.14 children. Seventy percent were in full-time employment, compared to 45% for women in Northern Ireland overall. Eighty-one percent were members of at least one voluntary organization and 71% of those employed worked in the voluntary sector, caring professions, or public sector. Only five had belonged to a political party in the province. Only one had previously run for office. More than two-thirds were switchers or serial abstainers, while only 30% were diehards, consistently supporting one party (Wilford 1999, 83). The survey results did not support the charge that the NIWC was dominated by republican feminists—instead it was truly a cross-community party.

Women in other political parties did not take kindly to competing with the NIWC candidate for votes, and other women incurred the wrath of their parties, such as Felicity Huston, who left the Conservative Party to join the NIWC and then had to campaign against her former Conservative Party colleague. Worker's Party president Marian Donnelly argued that the NIWC

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<sup>7</sup> Candidates for electoral office in the United Kingdom as a general rule have to pay a deposit to stand for office, ostensibly to deter frivolous candidates, such as the Monster Raving Looney Party, from using the election count and campaign as a stage for comedic antics. Losing a deposit is not just a humiliating show of the absence of electoral support, it has economic consequences for small parties trying to persuade candidates to run where they have little prospect of success. Prime Minister John Major's decision to waive candidate deposits was crucial for persuading NIWC candidates to come forward (Donaghy 1997, 5).

was undermining the role of women in political parties by urging women to go outside of the party system (McGilloway 1996, 25-6).

The international media's interest spurred the local media to cover the NIWC. They also received support from women in the Republic of Ireland, the United States, and around the world.

On May 20<sup>th</sup> the results were that the NIWC had received 7,731 votes out of 752,388 cast, the ninth largest of any parties. Fifteen women earned seats out of 110 members (14%) and they included two women from the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition.

### **The Forum**

McWilliams and Sagar were elected to participate in the Forum. As elected delegates, they received expenses. An application to the Rowntree Trust yielded a grant to pay for staff member Ann McCann and Bronagh Hinds to also receive expenses. Other women joined the talks team when they could and participated in the ongoing Saturday meetings.

Officially, the Forum was called the Northern Ireland Political Forum for Understanding and Dialogue. The NIWC called it the Forum for Misunderstanding and Monologue. Sinn Féin had already announced in advance it would not participate and the SDLP withdrew shortly thereafter, so the Forum was dominated by unionists. The NIWC were treated rudely when not ignored altogether. No one could ever seem to remember their names, they had difficulty being recognized, and were interrupted, told to "sit down and shut up" or merely heckled with "shame" or "treason." They were often called the Ladies Coalition and opponents used the term women only when preceding it for alliterative purposes by "whingeing or whining" (Dobrowolsky 2002, 314 quoting Sharrock). When Monica McWilliams made a speech about the parades commission report, Ian Paisley moored. (Cow is a term of derision for a woman in Britain.) In one of the most publicized exchanges, minister Willie McCrea declared, "As long as I live I will have a mission, which is to teach these women to stand behind the loyal men of Ulster." In reply, McWilliams and Sagar imitated Tammy Wynette singing "Stand by your Man" (Ryder 2002, 55 quoting *The Independent*, May 5, 1998). Not surprisingly, the NIWC women dreaded attending the Forum's sessions. Senator Mitchell observed:

The women overcame a great deal of adversity. Early in the process they were not taken seriously in our talks and they were insulted in the Forum. I would not permit such conduct in the negotiations, but it took many months for their courage and commitment to earn the respect of the other parties. In the final stages of the negotiations they were serious, important participants, and were treated as such (1999, 44).

By 1997 the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was a woman and a feminist, Mo Mowlam, although she did not escape sexist remarks in the Forum. The NIWC tried to get as many members as possible to observe the culture of abuse that characterized political discourse in



Northern Ireland and the media exposed the bully-boy tactics they suffered after much prodding by influential supporters (Fearon 1999, 58). Sticking fiercely to one of the three founding pillars of the party—inclusion—meant the women could not quit, no matter how hard the going. Moreover, to withdraw from the Forum and the Peace Talks would have associated the NIWC more squarely with the nationalists who were boycotting, and undermine their determination to be seen as a non-sectarian party. Abstentionism, according to Hinds, was a nationalist strategy.

Northern Ireland had been damaged by decades of adversarial and violent politics. It was clear that such behavior was a barrier to dialogue and serious engagement. Abuse was used as a tool to thwart substantive negotiation and political progress. Fundamental change was required if more women were to be encouraged to participate in politics. The Coalition decided that this negative language and behavior had to be interrupted and that it would challenge old attitudes and set new standards for respect and competence. It refused to accept abuse as normal political banter and constantly confronted disrespectful attitudes and actions with a view to fostering inclusion, respect, and political progress. It worked to free the concept of compromise from the negative connotation of the word “traitor.” These efforts played a more important role in the negotiation process than has often been credited by observers (Haley and Hinds 2003, 394).

## **The Talks**

After brokering fragile cease fires from both sides, the Peace Talks began on June 10, 1996, led by former U.S. Senator George Mitchell. The ten parties who had received the most votes in elections to the Forum each were allowed three representatives at the table, but only the NIWC chose women as part of its delegation. The difference between the Forum and the Peace Talks was night and day. Senator Mitchell refused to tolerate the heckling and abuse and even physical jostling and intimidation that characterized the Forum. The NIWC felt that Mitchell immediately grasped the importance of a respectful process and found “business-as-usual” in Northern Ireland repellant and unacceptable. Disagreement over how best to secure and verify the decommissioning of IRA weapons became a huge stumbling block to reaching an agreement. The NIWC succeeded in the talks, as it had not in the Forum, in bringing the four smaller parties together in a strategic alliance. Just as the NIWC had had a good working relationship with the Northern Ireland Office, it developed a good working relationship with Mitchell’s staff, particularly Martha Pope (Fearon 1999, 79).

More than a year into the talks, the new Labour Government invited Sinn Fein to join in September of 1997, prompting the walkout of the Ulster Unionist Party. In October of 1977, fifteen months after it was supposed to happen, Monica McWilliams presented the NIWC’s opening statement. She called for including those heretofore outside of the political process and emphasized that the process for resolving the constitutional issue was as important as the issue itself. Negotiations began in earnest with parties circulating papers on the three strands of the

negotiations. (The three strands followed the structure of the British and Irish Government's initial Joint Framework Document from February 22, 1995). Much to their surprise, the other parties' papers were often cursory. The NIWC influenced the process by circulating detailed proposals, proposals that Mitchell's drafts seemed to recycle and use.

On Strand One, Democratic Institutions in Northern Ireland, the NIWC called for an elected assembly as well as a Civic Forum made up of the voluntary sector, business, and trade unions. Both chambers should have an electoral system that resulted in women holding half of the seats. A human rights approach was one of the three pillars of the NIWC and framed its response to the remaining myriad of issues. They called for repealing the emergency legislation, signing the European Convention on Human Rights, and releasing prisoners. The NIWC also argued strongly for any new criminal justice system to address the issue of domestic violence.

On Strand Two, the North-South Ministerial Council, the NIWC called for those with Irish identity to be able to opt for British, Irish, or dual citizenship, but not to participate in the Irish presidential election. It called for the rights of British citizens to extend to the people of Northern Ireland as long as the people of Northern Ireland wished to avail themselves of them. It called for a Consultative Council of the Regions for Economic Development and for changes in the South, as well as the North, advocating a Commission on the Status of Women implemented on a North-South basis.

On Strand Three, the British-Irish Council, the NIWC supported a standing Intergovernmental conference between North and South and for consent that extended beyond seeking simple majority rule. When the debate turned to prisoner release, the NIWC emphasized the need to recognize all the victims of the conflict and to support the work of groups working with victims. The Talks moved to London and then Dublin as delegates wrestled with the consequences of sectarian murders and whether to expel parties as a result. The NIWC stuck to its policy of inclusion. Their position was that a deal with the center only would not hold, and that the fringes had to continue to participate.

As both the UK and Irish Governments turned up the heat for an agreement, the NIWC felt that the dealing was moving from the official talks, where they participated as equals, to the backrooms, from which they were excluded. In the end, they had to rely more on their ideas from their detailed early papers trickling into governmental proposals rather than being able to further them in direct negotiations. During the last week it seemed that everything was still on the table, nothing was banked as agreed. Anything could happen. After the Government delivered its draft on Monday, things began changing quickly. The Civic Forum disappeared, electoral reform was sinking, and only four lines were included about victims. The emphasis on writing, reading, and

drafting opened up schisms of ability between the delegates of the NIWC some of whom were skilled in such operations and others who felt excluded by them. Pearl Sagar, for example, may have been less adept at lobbying for particular text, but she did catch Secretary of State Mo Mowlam in the women's lavatory, shared a Menthol Light cigarette in the non-smoking building, and secured the inclusion of the Beijing text "the right of women to full and equal participation" much to the chagrin of Mowlam's staff member who told Sagar she would not be allowed to see the Secretary of State. It was difficult to get up-to-date copies of drafts and delegates were engaged in frantic bilateral negotiations with other parties or civil servants.

For victim's rights advocates, seeing an agreement with page after page about how to treat prisoners, the perpetrators of violence, without any recognition of the victims or the communities that had supported them with very little financial resources was unbearable. The NIWC went outside the process and to outside organizations to help draft alternative language, language that was not welcomed by the civil servants who had drafted the Government's proposal. In the end, Monica McWilliams had to get in Mo Mowlam's face and say simply, "this isn't going to work" until Mowlam ordered the provisions redrafted. The NIWC worried that without clear recognition and support of victims, the Agreement would never garner sufficient community support in a referendum.

When it came to the electoral system, the strategic alliance of the four small parties disintegrated. The NIWC favored eighteen six-seat constituencies with ten seats allocated at large based on voters' first preference votes. They won the support of the Irish and British Governments and Senator Mitchell, but the SDLP and the UUP, then the two largest parties, fiercely opposed their proposal as undemocratic and preferred not to have to deal with parties who received such a small share of the popular vote in the future. Not one other party had supported a Civic Forum and that item had brackets around it (indicating it was still being negotiated) in each successive draft. At the eleventh hour, it appeared that some of the larger parties would support it, perhaps as a consolation prize to the NIWC who was losing on the electoral issue. The Agreement called for a 108-member Assembly elected by the single-transferable vote system from existing Westminster constituencies.

Negotiations had been going on non-stop for 29 hours. Mitchell's staff had been working for 72 hours straight. The caterers had run out of food. The NIWC wanted at least to have reservations on the electoral system, making the SDLP, Alliance, and UUP admit publicly their opposition to it. Meanwhile, meetings with David Trimble and the UUP did not go well. Sinn Féin had made fifteen additional demands. Mitchell insisted everyone get into the chamber, agree, and leave quickly before the whole Agreement imploded. Any new demands or

reservations would put the entire Agreement in jeopardy. But could the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition have supported an Agreement without electoral guarantees? Was not getting more women into decision making its whole reason for being? Without electoral reform, would the NIWC have risked its political future? It had only been elected because the Forum elections used the more inclusive system. Monica McWilliams turned to Bronagh Hinds and said, "OK, you decide. What are we going to do?"

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For a guide to political parties in Northern Ireland, see:

<http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/gparties.htm>

For more on proportional representation, see:

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/polit/damy/prlib.htm>

For more on the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition see:

<http://www.niwc.org/index.asp>

For the text of the Good Friday Agreement see:

<http://www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf>