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### **Abstract**

In the male-dominated world of Northern Irish politics, the creation of a cross-community women's party to fight the Forum elections in 1996 did not go unnoticed. Created to give Northern Irish women a voice in the peace talks, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition has not only played a significant role in the drafting of the Good Friday Agreement, it has also managed to give women more visibility in Northern Irish politics and contributed to the promotion of a women's agenda. Although it initially succeeded in securing seats both at local and national level, the party did not withstand the polarisation of Northern Irish politics that marked the 2003 elections and decided to wind up in May 2006.

### **Résumé**

Créée quelques semaines avant les élections au Forum et le début des pourparlers de paix, la Northern Ireland Women's Coalition a fait, en 1996, une entrée remarquée dans le monde très masculin de la politique nord-irlandaise. Depuis, ce parti entièrement féminin et inter-communautaire n'a pas seulement participé de façon notable aux Accords du Vendredi Saint, il a également contribué à donner aux femmes une plus grande visibilité sur la scène politique nord-irlandaise et obtenu qu'un plus grand intérêt soit porté aux questions féminines. Représentée au niveau local et national depuis 1998, la NIWC n'a toutefois pas survécu aux élections de novembre 2003 et a décidé de cesser ses activités en mai 2006.

# PUTTING WOMEN IN THE PICTURE: THE IMPACT OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION ON NORTHERN IRISH POLITICS

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Abstract / résumé

In the male-dominated world of Northern Irish politics, the creation of a cross-community women's party to fight the Forum elections in 1996 did not go unnoticed. Created to give Northern Irish women a voice in the peace talks, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition has not only played a significant role in the drafting of the Good Friday Agreement, it has also managed to give women more visibility in Northern Irish politics and contributed to the promotion of a women's agenda. Although it initially succeeded in securing seats both at local and national level, the party did not withstand the polarisation of Northern Irish politics that marked the 2003 elections and decided to wind up in May 2006.

*Key words: Women – Politics – Northern Ireland – Coalition.*

Créée quelques semaines avant les élections au Forum et le début des pourparlers de paix, la *Northern Ireland Women's Coalition* a fait, en 1996, une entrée remarquée dans le monde très masculin de la politique nord-irlandaise. Depuis, ce parti entièrement féminin et inter-communautaire n'a pas seulement participé de façon notable aux Accords du Vendredi Saint, il a également contribué à donner aux femmes une plus grande visibilité sur la scène politique nord-irlandaise et obtenu qu'un plus grand intérêt soit porté aux questions féminines. Représentée au niveau local et national depuis 1998, la NIWC n'a toutefois pas survécu aux élections de novembre 2003 et a décidé de cesser ses activités en mai 2006.

*Mots-clés : Femmes – Politique – Irlande du Nord – Coalition.*

On May 11, 2006, ten years after its creation, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) wound up. During these ten years, the party has usually been regarded as a small but significant moderating influence in Northern Ireland politics, both for its part in the Belfast Agreement and for putting women on the agenda of Northern Irish politics. Until the formation of the NIWC in 1996, women in Northern Ireland were virtually absent from Northern Irish political life. Rarely had the major parties granted women a meaningful voice in policy

decisions, or leadership roles in the formal political process<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, the decision of some founding members of the NIWC to contest the Forum elections in May 1996 placed a media spotlight on the lack of women in politics in Northern Ireland and was described as “a ‘catalyst’ in changing the gender balance in the political sphere”<sup>2</sup>. “We are the only women’s party in the world that has elected representatives – that is quite some achievement”, its members could boast at their annual conference in 2002<sup>3</sup>. Ten years on, and a couple of months (2007) after their winding up, what assessment can be made of the party’s contribution to Northern Irish politics and to the debate about women’s representation in the province in particular? Was its impact only temporary, or did it have a lasting effect?

### **Women in Northern Irish politics: lacking a voice**

When the Women’s Coalition entered the political scene, in 1996, Northern Irish politics were male-dominated, just as they had been 75 years before, when Northern Ireland was created. From the moment when the province was given its own parliament in 1921 until the imposition of Direct Rule in 1972, only nine women served in Stormont<sup>4</sup>. At the last election in 1969, women represented 2 % of the candidates, which was the same insignificant level as that reached for the first election, in 1921. Since the abolition of Stormont in 1972, the situation had not really changed. Three (short-lived) regional bodies were created by different British governments: the Assembly of 1973-74,

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- 1 The Alliance Party and the nationalist parties – especially Sinn Féin – have had a better record of women’s representation than unionist parties. Until 1995 Sinn Féin was the only major party in Northern Ireland to use positive discrimination in the form of a 40 % quota for its Executive (Rosemary Sales, *Women divided : gender, religion, politics in Northern Ireland*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 174).
  - 2 Rachel Ward, “The Northern Ireland Peace Process: a Gender Issue?”, in Chris Gilligan and Jonathan Tonge, *Understanding the Peace Process in Northern Ireland*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997, p. 158. The Women’s Coalition was not however the first women’s party to have elected representatives. In Iceland Kvinnalistinn (the Women’s Alliance), a feminist movement founded in 1983, obtained 3 seats out of 60 in the Icelandic Parliament in 1983, 6 out of 63 in 1987, 5 out of 63 in 1991 and 3 out of 63 in 1995. When Kvinnalistinn was created only 5% of the members of Parliament in Iceland were women; after the first election it contested, this number rose to 15 % and in 1995 they were almost 30 %. In 1997 the Women’s Alliance split and its members joined different parties. Two former members now sit in Parliament as part of a new coalition-group (The Alliance).
  - 3 NIWC, Report from Annual Conference 2002, *Northern Ireland News from the Women’s Coalition*, Issue 3, Winter 2002.
  - 4 Six were Unionists, two Independents and one Liberal (Freda Donoghue, Robert Lee Miller & Rick Wilford, *Women and political participation in Northern Ireland*, Aldershot, Avebury, 1996, p. 9).

the Constitutional Convention of 1975-76 and the 1982-86 Assembly. Each of these was composed of 78 seats and included at most four women (5 %)⁵. Figures for Westminster were not any better: only three women had ever represented Northern Ireland at Westminster. Two of them were elected in the 1950s (Patricia Ford, Ulster Unionist, from 1953 to 1955, and Patricia McLaughlin, Ulster Unionist, from 1955 to 1959), one in 1970 (Bernadette Devlin, Independent Unity). Since the latter's defeat in 1974, the province had had the sad particularity of being the only part of the United Kingdom with no female presence at Westminster.

The absence of women in Northern Ireland's political life can be explained by the combination of a certain number of social and political factors, some of them common to women throughout Western Europe, others relevant to all of Ireland, others specific to the province. Thus, major obstacles to women's participation in Northern Irish politics have been their family and other caring responsibilities⁶, conformity to a rigid code of sexual division promoted by the Churches⁷, the armed conflict⁸, an electoral system (the first-past-the-post) known to be unfavourable to women and minority groups⁹, the weight of incumbency¹⁰ and the fact that women were, and still are, unlikely to be selected as candidates for winnable seats by political parties in the absence of positive action mechanisms¹¹. During the 1980s and early 1990s, therefore, women tended to channel their civic energies into community-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and avoided traditional political mechanisms.

This lack of representation became particularly resented in the mid-1990s: the Peace Process, which had begun in the early 1990s, did not take place at community level, but at the level of national politics, which meant that it was difficult for anyone outside the party system to have their voices heard. Yet, that very system was distrusted by many, young people and women in particular, and not believed by the latter to serve their interests. In 1996, almost two-thirds of women respondents to a

5 Rick Wilford, "Women's Candidacies and Electability in a Divided Society: the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and the 1996 Forum Election", *Women and Politics*, vol. 20 (1), 1999, p. 78.

6 Laura Shepherd Robinson and Joni Lovenduski, *Women and Candidate Selection in British Political Parties*, London, Fawcett, 2002, p. 8.

7 Rosemary Sales, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

8 Grainne McCoy, «Women, Community and Politics in Northern Ireland», in Carmel Roulston and Celia Davies (eds), *Gender, Democracy and Inclusion in Northern Ireland*, New York, Palgrave, 2000, p. 19.

9 *Idem.*

10 Yvonne Galligan, Michael Laver, Gemma Carney, «The Effect of Candidate Gender on Voting in Ireland, 1997», *Irish Political Studies*, vol. 14, 1997, pp. 118-22.

11 Laura Shepherd Robinson and Joni Lovenduski, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

survey wished to see more women in Parliament and on local councils 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 province's parties did not give women the opportunity to enter politics<sup>12</sup>.

### **The origins of the Coalition**

The creation of the Women's Coalition has usually been traced back to a dinner, back in April 1996, when Avila Kimurray and Monica McWilliams, two women with a long involvement in the women's movement, discussed the forthcoming peace talks, lamenting the prospect that women, once again, would be left out as men negotiated the future of Northern Ireland, and brainstorming about how women could be "written into, rather than out of" the process<sup>13</sup>. Avila Kilmurray was a former trade union official and current director of the largest community foundation in Northern Ireland; Monica McWilliams, a University lecturer, had been active in the women's rights movement since the mid-1970s. Both believed that women, who had traditionally been kept out of Northern Irish politics, should take part in the decisions that might shape the political future of the province. Two months before, the British and Irish governments had issued a Joint Communiqué announcing the setting up of all party talks to determine the future of Northern Ireland and proposing that elections be held to determine who would participate in the forthcoming peace talks and the Northern Ireland Forum which was to run in parallel with the two-year talks process.

Working with the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform – a group which had long been campaigning for women's equal civic and political rights – both women decided that pressure should be placed on the Northern Ireland Office to reserve a space in the election for a women's party. The idea was circulated among women's groups and organisations, among which the proposal seemed to be generally approved. As the method of election had not yet been defined and the governments had asked for suggestions, the NIWEP advocated a gender-proofed party list system (each party was to alternate women

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12 Rick Wilford, "Women and Politics in Northern Ireland", in Joni Lovenduski & Pippa Norris (eds), *Women in Politics*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 51.

13 Kate Fearon and Monica McWilliams, "Swimming against the mainstream: the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition", in Carmel Roulston and Celia Davies (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 119.

and men in equal proportions on their lists) as well as funds for non-party groups to be included in the talks (the aim of this last proposal being to advantage community organisations in which women were particularly active). Women, it was stressed, were “particularly conscious that they ha[d] not been included to date and wish[ed] to have this injustice redressed”<sup>14</sup>.

The proposals were circulated to the British Government and the political parties but were largely ignored: the system advocated by the British Government that was made public in late March was that of a constituency-based party list system and a regional list, a form of proportional representation (but not alternating men and women, as the NIWEP had proposed)<sup>15</sup>. Not only had the Northern Ireland Office not included any of the provisions the NIWEP had urged on them to include more women but, on April 1<sup>st</sup>, because time was short, it designated the fifteen parties that would participate rather than permitting all parties who wanted to participate to register<sup>16</sup>. As the organisation feared the absence of women in the talks, it then planned a meeting in the Ulster People's College on April 17<sup>th</sup>, which over two hundred groups of women were invited to attend, and lobbied both governments to place a women's network on the list<sup>17</sup>. To their surprise, the Government responded positively and asked to know the name of the women's party to meet legislative deadlines. The name “Northern Ireland Women's Coalition” was registered. On April 17<sup>th</sup>, the Government issued a revised list of thirty parties that included the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. The NIWC now had six weeks to mount a campaign and less than three weeks (before May 9<sup>th</sup>) to choose its candidates.

The Women's Coalition was formed to contest the election for delegates to the talks “on a platform of the lack of access to political and public life for women”, guided “by the principles of equality, human rights and inclusion in all our affairs”<sup>18</sup>. The idea of a gender-specific party did not attract unanimous approval, nor did that of a cross-community alliance. Nevertheless, it was decided that the NIWC would be created for the duration of the talks process and that its existence

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14 Kate Fearon and Monica McWilliams, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

15 Each of the eighteen 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 Forum members was thus 110.

16 Rick Wilford, “Women's candidacies and Electability in a Divided Society”, *op. cit.* p. 82.

17 Kate Fearon and Monica McWilliams, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

18 The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, *Aims and Objectives*, <http://www.niwc.org/files/aimsobs.htm>, website consulted May 6, 2002.



would be reviewed after two years<sup>19</sup>. The NIWC, which was keen that the party should not be rooted exclusively or mainly in one of the two communities, attempted to draw women from both traditions to reflect the diversity of interests and identities that existed in Northern Ireland. Most of the women involved were already active in informal politics: the peace and integrated education movements and the women's rights movement.

By May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1996, the NIWC had opened offices in Belfast, Derry and Enniskillen and placed advertisements in the local press inviting applications from potential candidates<sup>20</sup>. In order to include both nationalist and unionist women, it refused to take any position on the constitutional question, believing that, through the talks process, the different parties would be able to come to an agreement on the status of Northern Ireland. Drawing on the network of women's groups in the province the Women's Coalition was able to field 70 candidates. This was the first time such a large number of women had contested an election in Northern Ireland. The candidates came from working-class and middle-class backgrounds, urban and rural areas and, most important of all, from both communities. A majority of them were either university graduates or had a professional qualification and were members of at least one voluntary organisation. Only five had belonged to a political party in the province and only one had run for office before<sup>21</sup>.

The credibility of the newly-formed NIWC was challenged on several occasions during the elections, mostly by unionist politicians. "They haven't been at the forefront of the battle when shots were being fired or when the constitution of Northern Ireland was in peril. They are not representative of the decent Ulster women that I speak to," Peter Robinson, of the DUP, declared while David Ervine of the PUP, although acknowledging the capacity of women to run an election campaign, called into question their ability "as a cross-community group" to "look at this election and understand why this election is called and then field candidates to actually deal with the problems that undoubtedly beset us"<sup>22</sup>.

The Women's Coalition's securing two seats at the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue elected on May 30<sup>th</sup> and the right to send two delegates to the All-Party Talks came as a surprise to many. It was the first time a women's party had contested an election in the province.

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19 NIWC, *NIWC Operation*, 1996, Belfast, in Kate Fearon and Monica McWilliams, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

20 Rick Wilford, "Women's candidacies and Electability in a Divided Society", p. 82.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

22 Democratic Dialogue, "Power, Politics, Positionings – Women in Northern Ireland", Report n° 4, October 1996, p. 4.

Yet, after only two months of existence and six weeks of “do-it-yourself campaigning”, the Coalition had managed to come ninth among all the parties which had contested the election and secure 7,731 votes<sup>23</sup>.

The peace talks began on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1996, led by former U.S. Senator George Mitchell. The nine parties which had received the highest number of votes in elections to the Forum were allowed representatives at the table (Sinn Féin was barred from the talks as the IRA continued its campaign of violence<sup>24</sup>). The NIWC representation were the only women.

### Reactions

The NIWC certainly attracted public attention and curiosity as to how the gender issue could intersect with sectarian issues and talks about the constitution. They quickly became the darlings of the media, who were eager to see something new come out of Northern Ireland, but their cross-community background and all-female composition also meant they had to face hostility and derision, especially at the Forum (chaired by John Gorman), which was not so effectively chaired as the peace talks (chaired by Senator George Mitchell, Harry Holkeri and John de Chastelain).

The fact that Sinn Féin never took their seats because of the continuing IRA campaign and that the SDLP withdrew from the Forum during the summer of 1996 (in the middle of the Dumcree crisis) might partly account for the unionist anger, of which the two delegates of the Women's Coalition had to bear the brunt, but certainly does not suffice to explain the sectarian and sexist insults of which Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sagar were the object. When the two NIWC representatives entered the talks, they were taunted and insulted by DUP, UKUP and UUP men who called them “scum”, “traitors” and “silly women”<sup>25</sup>. One unionist politician said about them that they should be at home, “breeding children for Ulster”<sup>26</sup>. Notoriously, Ian Paisley made mooing noises when Monica McWilliams stood up to speak and DUP stalwart Rev. 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”, to which Monica McWilliams and her colleague, Pearl Sagar, replied by

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23 Kate Fearon and Monica McWilliams, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

24 The IRA called off its 1994 cease-fire when they detonated a bomb at South Quay in the London Docklands area, in February 1996, killing two people and injuring many more.

25 Kate Fearon, *Women's Work: the Story of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition*, Belfast, Blackstaff, 1999, pp. 51, 121.

26 Kate Fearon and Monica McWilliams, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

launching into an impromptu version of Tammy Wynette's "Stand by your Man"<sup>27</sup>.

Unionists were also suspicious of the Coalition's supposed neutrality on the constitutional question, a suspicion that partly stemmed from the Coalition's position on decommissioning (which, they thought, did not need to take place prior to talks) and from their insistence that Sinn Féin be represented at the talks. Ian Paisley also used the Coalition's support of Roisin McAliskey<sup>28</sup> to label the organisation "pro-republican", even though the latter insisted that they would have supported her in the same way had she been a loyalist. The case of a pregnant woman in poor health imprisoned in a men's jail, they insisted, was a human rights issue.

### **The Peace Talks**

The party chose not to take one single position on the constitutional issue, but to promote instead three core principles around which policy would be built: "inclusion, equality and human rights in every sphere of politics"<sup>29</sup>. As the peace process unfolded, the two party representatives, Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sagar, had to translate those principles into practice, which was done by trying to find common ground for agreement and necessarily implied "compromises". Yet, it was not always easy for members coming from different religious, cultural and political backgrounds, to overcome the sectarian divide and come to an agreement as to the ways to resolve social and economic problems, let alone political ones. Thus, agreeing, in early 1996, to support the inclusion of Sinn Féin in the peace talks whether or not the IRA called a cease-fire was not easy for unionist women, just as it was extremely difficult for women from nationalist backgrounds to support the decision by the NIWC delegates in February 1998 to oppose the expulsion of the Unionist Democratic Party from the talks following the random murder campaign conducted by the Ulster Freedom

<sup>27</sup> Fionola Meredith, "Stand by your woman", *Village*, Thursday, May 11th, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Roisin McAliskey, the daughter of Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, was accused of attempted murder during an IRA attack on British army barracks in Germany and was arrested in 1996 and imprisoned in a high-security wing of Belmarsh Jail, a men's prison. She was pregnant at the time and in poor health and after months of international outcry, was transferred to a special women and baby unit in a psychiatric hospital. The NIWC had supported the campaign to release Roisin McAliskey on compassionate bail (*An Phoblacht, Republican News*, January 16, 1997, "Women's Coalition supports McAliskey bail call", <http://republican-news.org/archive/1997/January16/16pris.html>, website consulted July 15th, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> The NIWC, *Aims and Objectives*, <http://www.niwc.org/files/aimsobs.htm>, website consulted May 6th, 2002.

Fighters (to which the party was linked<sup>30</sup>). Dialogue was essential in the resolution of various aspects of the conflict and took place during monthly meetings which in turn often led to the setting up of smaller discussion groups of women from the same background where they could freely discuss and exchange opinions<sup>31</sup>. The whole process was not about pretending to ignore differences and the conflict, they insisted, but about acknowledging them and discussing them<sup>32</sup>.

During the year that followed, the Women's Coalition actively negotiated the constitutional elements of the Agreement as well as the issues concerning the resolution of the conflict (integrated education<sup>33</sup>, policing, prisoners, human rights and equality). It succeeded in having its idea of a Civic Forum to sit alongside the elected Assembly accepted (their aim being to ensure that informal politics were not marginalised by the future governmental structures) and drafted the section of the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement on how the victims of the Troubles would be treated. Concerning gender issues, the NIWC can take credit for having included in the Good Friday Agreement clauses the right of women to full and equal participation in the political life of the province through two specific references: the first, in the section "Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity", where the parties "affirm their commitment to the mutual respect, the civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community" and in particular to "the right of women to full and equal political participation"<sup>34</sup>; the second one in the section on "Economic, Social

30 The UDP was formed in 1989 from the Ulster Loyalist Democratic Party (ULDP), itself set up in 1981 by the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), which, since 1973, had used the cover name of Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) to claim the responsibility for the killing of Catholics. Like the IRA, the UDP tried to present itself as a distinct organisation from the UDA. It nevertheless admitted that it provided political advice to the UDA and one of its central policies was the release of UFF prisoners. The UDP left the peace talks in January 1998 after the UFF admitted taking part in the killing of three Catholics. If it had not left, it would have been suspended as parties are not allowed in the talks if groups to which they are linked take part in violence. The UDP was re-admitted in February. The party was dissolved in November 2001.

31 Kate Fearon and Monica McWilliams, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

32 *Idem.*

33 Jane Morrice explained in an interview to the Council of Europe: "As the negotiations progressed, on the Monday before Good Friday there still was not one mention of the possibility of Catholics and Protestants being educated together, of the possibility of integrated education. So we sat down and drafted three lines calling for the promotion of integrated education, mixed housing, and a culture of tolerance. I can safely say if we hadn't been there, this Agreement, which is nearly the Constitution of Northern Ireland, would not have included integrated education and mixed housing", Interview January 27th, 2007, [http://www.coe.int/T/E/Com/Files/interviews/20040128\\_interv\\_Morrice.asp](http://www.coe.int/T/E/Com/Files/interviews/20040128_interv_Morrice.asp), website consulted February 7th, 2007.

34 Good Friday Agreement, <http://www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf>, website consulted May 6th, 2006.

and Cultural Issues” where the parties pledge themselves to promote “the advancement of women in public life”. It also pressured the Forum to generate a code of conduct dealing with sectarianism and sexism and encouraged political parties to include women and proposed a “50/50 gender balance” in “any new political structures”<sup>35</sup>.

The peace talks eventually reached an agreement on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1998 providing for a new Northern Ireland Assembly, which would govern through a power-sharing executive on a number of devolved matters (health, education, finance, sport, culture...), in addition to a North-South Ministerial Council and a British-Irish Council. By then, the Women’s Coalition, despite its small size, had gained respect and credibility. Its particular contribution to the peace process was later underlined by Peter Mandelson, who had replaced Mo Mowlam as Northern Ireland Secretary, at the annual conference of the NIWC, on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1999:

What we have seen over the past few weeks has been a gentle remoulding of the political landscape. Quietly, old enemies have left their fortresses and begun to seek the ground that you have long occupied. Step by step they have begun to forge the sort of trust that you have long known is the very lifeblood of mature, democratic politics. You have always believed that politics must transcend the old dogmas that blocked progress for so long. Your politics is not about nationalist against unionist, Catholic against Protestant. It is about respect against intolerance; it is about democracy against tyranny; it is about peace against violence. It is about making a real, palpable difference to people’s everyday lives.<sup>36</sup>

### **Sustainability**

In less than a year after its inception, the Women’s Coalition fought two further elections: the 1997 general election and the 1997 local government election. It gained no seat at Westminster but ran twenty candidates in the local council elections and had a councillor to Down District Council elected (Anne Carr) (table 1). After taking part in the campaign to ensure a “Yes” vote in the referendum held in May 1998 to give public endorsement to the Good Friday Agreement, the Women’s Coalition then contested the elections to the new Northern Ireland Assembly, which were to take place in June. The Coalition only had the resources to put forwards eight candidates, yet succeeded in gaining

35 NIWC, “An Evaluation of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue”, May 1997 and NIWC, “Conflict, Peace and political Settlement”, n.d. in Linda Racioppi & Katherine O’Sullivan See, “‘This we will maintain’: gender, ethno-nationalism and the politics of unionism in Northern Ireland”, *Nations and Nationalism* 7 (1), 2001, p. 106.

36 Speech by the Secretary of State Peter Mandelson to the Annual Conference of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1999.

1.61 % of the votes and two seats: South Belfast, held by Monica McWilliams, and North Down, by Jane Morrice.

Following the signing of the Agreement, attendance at the monthly meetings organised by the NWCI increased, as did NIWC membership. After more than a year, the NIWC decided to confirm its status as a political party and, in November 1998, its first party conference was held in Cookstown, on which occasion a constitution was adopted and the annual election of a 12-15 member executive committee to make policy decisions was provided for. This executive committee consisted of two representatives from each county plus ex-officio members. The NIWC now envisaged a much longer life span than the one that had originally been planned – the duration of the peace process. All this time, however, the NIWC remained firmly rooted in the world of public activism and held monthly meetings of the full (cross-community) membership of the Coalition and maintained regular contact with a range of community and non-governmental organisation leaders on specific issues under discussion.

The next elections were those of 2001. The Westminster elections, just as the previous ones, in 1997, proved disappointing but the local council elections that were held on the same day saw a record number of women elected and the election of one councillor from the Coalition, which had fielded eight candidates (table 1).

Throughout this period, the NIWC remained the target of accusations on the part of unionist parties. On October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2002, following allegations of IRA intelligence gathering at Stormont, the Assembly underwent its third suspension (the first one was in May 2000, the second one in July 2001) to prevent the collapse of the coalition government. The NIWC then called for urgent all-party talks to address the issue. Besides the general problem of trust, this new suspension raised once more the question of whether to exclude Sinn Féin from the government or not. When the talks began in late November, the NIWC was accused by Norman Boyd, Northern Ireland Unionist Party Assembly Member for South Antrim and Party Whip, of following a republican agenda because of their support for Sinn Féin joining the policing board. The NIWC, Boyd said, was living in “cloud cuckoo land” if they believed that “if Sinn Féin joined the policing board it would amount to the IRA standing down”. He described them as being “gullible, naïve and stupid [...] becoming more desperate every day to save the failed Belfast Agreement with their loony utterances” and the “puppets for Sinn Féin in the Assembly”<sup>37</sup>. Monica McWilliams’ republican background was often referred to.

37 NIUP, November 17th, 2002, “Party Whip Norman Boyd accuses Women’s Coalition of following a republican agenda”, <http://www.niup.org/news>, website consulted July 5th, 2005.

In an attempt to revive Northern Ireland's power-sharing executive, that was still suspended, new elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly were held in November 2003. The NIWC on that occasion fielded eight candidates<sup>38</sup>. These elections proved a very bitter fight, not so much between nationalists and unionists as within the two movements with, on one side, the DUP versus the UUP and, on the other side, Sinn Féin versus the SDLP. The consequence, however, was that the two main sectarian blocks dominated the elections at the expense of the smaller parties that had grown in the peace process, such as the PUP and the Women's Coalition. Thus, while the elections resulted in a marginal increase in women members of the MLA (Members of the Legislative Assembly), party leader Monica McWilliams and Jane Morrice lost their places in the Assembly (table 1). Besides, the polarisation that emerged from this vote meant that the Assembly was now almost exclusively composed of four parties<sup>39</sup> and two main blocks, a massive unionist one and a huge nationalist one, which would render it very hard for the government to bring about a restoration of the Assembly.

From that time, the NIWC continued to lose votes and its failure to win any local council seats in 2005 following the loss of its two Assembly seats in 2003 finally prompted it to put an end to its political activities, which was done, after considerable discussion, in May 2006. In the meantime, Monica McWilliams had been appointed Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC)<sup>40</sup>, in June 2005, an appointment that was loudly criticized by anti-abortion activists because of the Women's Coalition's stance on abortion. "Someone who does not recognise the right to life of every human being, born and unborn, is unfit for the position of Chief Commissioner on a 'human rights' commission" was one of the attacks directed against McWilliams but others came from unionist politicians who suspected her of defending republican ideals<sup>41</sup>.

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38 Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics, Devolved elections 2003, <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/Ukhtmls/electionNInov03.htm>, website consulted July 5th, 2005.

39 With the exception of 9 seats (6 for the Alliance Party, 1 for the PUP, 1 for the UKUP and one Independent).

40 The NIHRC, which began its work in March 1999, is charged with ensuring the promotion and protection of human rights and its functions include keeping under review the adequacy and effectiveness of laws and practices, making recommendations to the government, providing information and promoting awareness of human rights as well as considering draft legislation that has been referred to it by the Assembly ("Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity", Northern Ireland Act, 1998, section 69, paragraph 5).

41 Fionola Meredith, *op. cit.*

Back in 2002, the *Irish Times* had attempted to explain the failure of the NWIC to capitalise on their 1998 gains:

They have no tribal standing. The Women's Coalition includes town and country women: middle- and working-class women; women of all religions and none. It attracts a few votes everywhere, but not enough votes to get elected in any one constituency. Not unless a "top-up" mechanism had been agreed in the procedure for election to the new Northern Ireland Assembly.<sup>42</sup>

The fact is that the single transferable vote system for elections to the Assembly in 1998 had from the outset been criticised by the Women's Coalition and some smaller parties who would have liked a top-up system, similar to that used for the 1996 Forum election, or the additional member system proposed for Scotland and Wales. Topping-up, however, was rejected by both the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP. In the end the political compromise was that all eighteen constituencies would elect not five but six members of the new body by single transferable vote.

**Table 1: Percentage of the votes obtained by the NIWC at the different elections, 1996-2005**

Forum elections		Westminster elections		
	May 1996		May 1997	June 2001
Votes	7,731	Votes	3,024	2,968
% votes	1.03	% votes	0.40	0.37
Change % votes	————	Change % votes	————	- 0.03
Seats	2	Seats	0	0

  

Assembly elections			Local elections			
	June 1998	Nov. 2003		May 1997	June 2001	May 2005
Votes	13,019	5,785	Votes	<b>3,380</b>	<b>3,301</b>	<b>738</b>
% votes	1.61	0.84	% votes	1	0.40	0.10
Change % votes	————	- 0.77	Change % votes	————	- 0.6	- 0.3
Seats	2	0	Seats	1	1	0

Sources: Cain, <http://www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/politics/election>, website consulted July 10, 2006; Ark, Northern Ireland social and political archives, <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/flg97.htm>, website consulted July 10, 2006; BBC news, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/vote2003/northern\\_ireland/html/vote.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/vote2003/northern_ireland/html/vote.stm), website consulted July 10, 2006.

42 Nuala O'Faolain, "It's 'Cheerio girls, and thanks for the laugh' in sexist North", *Irish Times*, October 30th, 2002.



### The NIWC's legacy

Since its creation, in 1996, the Coalition has tried to challenge the male political order and carve a space across the divides of the conflict. How successful has it been?

When asked whether she had been able to influence thinking in other parties, Monica McWilliams' answer in January 2001 was:

At a practical level, women have carried out some phenomenal pieces of work but that did not have an impact on the Equal Opportunities thinking of the mainstream political parties. It is only now as a result of the coalition having come along and acted as a vanguard that the other parties are really beginning to pull up their socks. They realise that if we could get elected on the back of Equal Opportunities, then there is a message there that they were not doing something right. Now they are starting to talk about Equal Opportunities and promoting women in politics.<sup>43</sup>

Politically, the NIWC has brought attention to women's interests in policy-making. Stormont today has practices that acknowledge the family responsibilities of their legislators. MLAs and staff within the Assembly are helped with child-care through the payment of a weekly childcare allowance and the Standing Orders ruled that "family-friendly" hours should be adhered to so that when the Assembly meets in session debate must end by 6 pm<sup>44</sup>. When, on one occasion – in November 2000 –, the Standing Orders were suspended to allow the Programme for Government to be debated, the breach was vigorously opposed by Jane Morrice, who argued that it was "setting a precedent that is totally improper" and "defeating our proud achievement of securing family-friendly working hours for this Assembly"<sup>45</sup>. An Equality Unit was also set up in the Assembly as part of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's Office, even though opinion was divided as to whether not having a distinct Equality Department might not lead to having it "buried in a structure where so many other issues are regarded as having priority"<sup>46</sup>.

To a certain extent, the existence of the Coalition may have forced party leaders – both nationalist and unionist – to pay more attention to

43 European Database: Women in Decision-making, Interview McWilliams, [http://www.fczb.de/projekte/wid\\_db/Interviews/Uk/Mcwilliams.htm](http://www.fczb.de/projekte/wid_db/Interviews/Uk/Mcwilliams.htm), website consulted July 16th, 2006.

44 Northern Ireland Assembly, Committee on Procedures, *Standing Orders*, Operation of the Assembly, 10 (2), September 9th, 2002.

45 Northern Ireland Assembly, Monday November 13, 2000, Programme for Government, <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/record/reports/001113.htm#3>, website consulted February 7th, 2007.

46 Margaret Ward, *The Northern Ireland Assembly and Women, assessing the gender deficit*, Democratic Dialogue, December 2000, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/dd/papers/women-assembly.htm>, website consulted January 15th, 2003.

women's interests in their propaganda and to try to give a more feminised image of themselves. Thus, while there had been no reference to women in their 1992 general election manifesto, the UUP could boast in their 1998 manifesto:

The Ulster Unionist Party has the highest number of women elected representatives in Northern Ireland. Currently, 32 % of female councillors are members of the Ulster Unionist Party. We believe that women are entitled to have equal access to the employment market and to opportunities to pursue chosen careers. There should be equal pay for equal work, with legal safeguards of definition and choice between full and part-time work for both sexes. We believe that women should have access to training compatible with family responsibilities and we will support policies which promote the reconciliation of work and family life.<sup>47</sup>

The Progressive Unionist Party, under the section "Equal Rights", also claimed to be "conscious of the gross under-representation of women in positions of power and influence" and to "actively encourage the nomination and acceptance of women as party delegates, office bearers and candidates for election"; it supported a list of reforms including equal wages, the right to abortion and to contraception and childcare facilities on the workplace. As for the main nationalist parties, the SDLP promised that in the new administration it would work for equal pay, "universally available childcare", training opportunities for women wishing to enter or re-enter the job-market and a new Sex Offence legislation<sup>48</sup>, while Sinn Féin advocated "measures to achieve equality of representation both in political life and in appointments to all public bodies", "equality of outcome in employment structures, education and training", the provision of childcare facilities and subsidies for childcare, free screening for breast cancer and smear testing for cervical cancer and "a multi-faceted approach to eradicate violence against women"<sup>49</sup>.

The election of 14 women out of the 108 MLAs in 1998 represented a considerable increase in the numbers of women in political life in Northern Ireland: from 5% in the previous Northern Irish assemblies and 0% at Westminster, they now represented 12.9 % of the members of the new Assembly, the best scores (apart from the 100% of the NIWC) going to Sinn Féin's 27.8%, followed by the Alliance's 16.7% and the SDLP's 12.5%<sup>50</sup>. This increase was the direct result of the higher numbers of women put forward by the main parties to contest the June 1998 elections, itself a response to the advent of the NIWC: motivated by the fear that votes for female candidates should be given away to the Coalition, the main political parties added a number of

47 UUP Manifesto 1998, "Together with the Union".

48 SDLP 1998 Northern Ireland Assembly Election Manifesto, "Now, Say Yes to a Future Together".

49 Sinn Féin Manifesto 1998: *Ready for Government*.

women to their lists during the election to the Assembly. Still, the number of women candidates put forward certainly remained very low, all the more when compared to the numerical importance of women in the main political parties at the time: thus, while, in 1998, women represented 60 % of Democratic Unionist Party members, 50 % of the Alliance Party, 47 % of the SDLP, 42% of the UUP and 33 % of Sinn Féin, they only represented 15.6 %<sup>51</sup> of their candidates to the 1998 Assembly elections.

Female visibility in politics has, since then, continued to grow: at the 2003 elections to the Assembly, slightly more women candidates were nominated (19.5 % of the candidates of the main parties). Female representation has also kept increasing both at local and national levels (table 2), the most impressive changes concerning local council elections and Westminster which, in 2001, saw the elections of the first three women MPs for Northern Ireland since 1969 (Ulster Unionist Sylvia Hermon, Iris Robinson for the DUP and Michelle Gildernew for Sinn Féin). Finally, women have tended to be promoted to positions of power within political parties: in January 2003, women represented approximately 50 % of the membership of the UUP and 33 % of its National Executive<sup>52</sup> (against 40 % and 15% in 1995<sup>53</sup>) while the figures in the SDLP were respectively 50 % and 50 % sitting on the General Council Committee<sup>54</sup>.

**Table 2: Evolution in the percentage of Northern Irish women elected at the Assembly, local councils and Westminster, 1993-2005**

Assembly elections % women	1998 13%	2003 16.7%	
Local councils elections	1993 11.5%	1997 14%	2001 19%
Westminster elections	1997 0%	2001 16.6%	2005 16.6%

Sources: Figures obtained from the Centre for the Advancement of Women in Politics, <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp>, website consulted July 10, 2006.

50 The UUP and the DUP, the two main Unionist parties, respectively only had 7.1 % and 5 % female members.

51 The UUP stood only 4 women (8.3 % of their total candidates), the DUP 4 women (11.8 %), the SDLP 6 candidates (16.2 %), Sinn Féin 8 candidates (21 %) and the Alliance 6 candidates (28.5%, the largest percentage). Source: Centre for the Advancement of Women in Politics, <http://www.qub.ac.uk:cawp/Ukhtmls/electionNInov03.htm>, July 14th, 2006.

52 Information provided by Alison Cardwell of the UUP, January 15th, 2003.

53 UUP website : <http://ww.uup.org/whoswho/officers-htm>, March 3th, 2000.

54 Information provided by Gerry Cosgrove, General Secretary, January 16th, 2003.

Asked about the impact of the Coalition on the Assembly, Monica McWilliams acknowledged that some progress had been made but underlined the difficulties still met by women as far as male attitudes were concerned:

Women have been put forward as spokespersons, there has been a deputy speaker<sup>55</sup> and two women have been nominated Ministers. In the Assembly itself, we introduced family-friendly policies, got a childcare allowance. But we have a long way to go. The attitudes towards us two as women is still incredibly traditional. This Assembly is a very conservative place.<sup>56</sup>

Male behaviour within the Assembly certainly did not improve as fast as women's representation. Several female MLAs in 2000 commented on the lack of respect shown to them and on the sexist interruptions they had to face, particularly on the part of unionist members, when trying to make speeches in the chamber<sup>57</sup>. Since the Assembly has only been restored recently, it is yet too early to say whether this hostility was only a temporary reaction to the new prominence of women in Northern Irish politics.

Although it cannot be claimed that the NIWC played a primordial role in the Peace Process, it can certainly be argued that they contributed to change the culture of politics in Northern Ireland. Simply by contesting the election, the Coalition destroyed the myth that women were neither available nor willing to compete and sensitised the other parties to the issue of women's representation. By participating in the negotiations, the NIWC was then able to insert some of its concerns concerning women's rights into the text of the Good Friday Agreement and to stress human rights and equality issues. "The Women's Coalition cannot claim the credit to have got more women into politics", declared Jane Morrice just before the winding up of the party, in March 2006, "but I think we played a very important role by putting women on the agenda"<sup>58</sup>.

Still, the small progress that has taken place should not obliterate the fact that, as far as women's representation is concerned, Northern Ireland still falls well behind the other regions of the United Kingdom: today women represent 20 % of the Members of Parliament at Westminster, 39.5 % of the Members of the Scottish Parliament and 50 % of the Welsh Assembly Members. Stormont's 16%, from such a viewpoint, looks very much like a dismal record. Besides, the interest in women's issues that the main political parties seemed eager to show

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55 Jane Morrice.

56 European Database: Women in Decision-making, *op. cit.*

57 Margaret Ward, *op.cit.*

58 Robin Sheeran, "Northern Ireland: Gender Agenda", The Politics Show Northern Ireland, BBC News, February 23rd, 2006.

during the first Assembly elections campaign has, since then, almost completely disappeared: the UUP 2003 manifesto made absolutely no mention of women, while the SDLP did nothing more than promise to “introduce equal pay audits to eliminate the gap between men and women’s earnings”<sup>59</sup>. Only Sinn Féin devoted a whole section to women, entitled “Equality for Women”, in which it committed itself to promote gender equality in the political and civic sphere as well as the prevention of domestic violence and more accessible childcare.

In 1999, the founding statement of the Women’s Agenda for the Northern Ireland Assembly<sup>60</sup> argued that the Assembly, because it was “a key player” in shaping the equality agenda, “[had] the potential to transform the situation of women”<sup>61</sup>. There is, however, very little indication that it has. The conservative nature of Northern Irish society and the great number of problems to which the Assembly has so far been confronted mean that women’s issues are not a priority and that the politicians’ responses to women’s issues have so far appeared as more rhetorical than real.

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59 UUP Manifesto 2003, “The Future not the Past”, SDLP 2003 Manifesto, “Reshaping Government, Rebuilding Public Services”.

60 An initiative of the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Union and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (Margaret Ward, *op. cit.*).

61 *Idem.*