

"Flawed as the Agreement is in parts, it can change the culture of politics here"

Kate Fearon of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition

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The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was formed in the spring of 1996. It describes itself as "truly cross-community in composition. Our members are women and men from diverse backgrounds and traditions: rural and urban; young and old; republican, loyalist, nationalist, unionist and other."

In 1996, the NIWC stood candidates in elections held to determine which parties would be represented in the talks held at Stormont Castle that produced the Northern Ireland Agreement. The NIWC finished within the top 10 parties and sent two delegates to the talks. The NIWC actively supported the "Yes" campaign in the May 22 referendum.

RT: What is the attitude of your organisation to the Agreement and why?

KF: We are very supportive. We were one of the eight parties that negotiated and reached the conclusion, and we have actively campaigned for a "Yes" vote. This is the best chance we are ever going to get of securing peace and a normal society in Northern Ireland, for ourselves and those who come after us.

The Agreement also refers to including a wide variety of excluded groups--women, people with disabilities, victims of the troubles, those with a different sexual orientation. It is potentially a very exciting document. For us, the real test of the Agreement will be how it is implemented, but there is a huge potential.

RT: What expectations do you have of the Agreement?

KF: Flawed as it is in parts, it can change the culture of politics here. Even in the course of the referendum campaign we've had a different type of politics, where politicians have had a discourse with leaders in the business and the Northern Ireland Office sector. The Agreement provides for a "Civic Forum" that will

continue this dialogue. It represents a different way of doing politics.

RT: Why do you think that the Agreement is going to lead to a resolution of the conflicts?

KF: It includes virtually all of those people that were party to the conflict, both as perpetrators of violence and as advocates of exclusively democratic means. Everybody who was part of the problem will make up part of the solution. We didn't get everybody but we got huge numbers of people who have not been involved before. Moreover this agreement actually addresses issues within the community, like policing, the release of prisoners, the circumstances in which the victims have been left, as well as the constitutional stuff that all the previous attempts focused exclusively on.

RT: The Agreement perpetuates sectarian divisions by ensuring that members of the Assembly will have to identify themselves as nationalist, unionist or other. And the votes of the "other" camp don't count when it comes to certain questions. Your organisation will be in the "other" category.

KF: That is one of the problems that we have with the Agreement, but the Agreement is bigger than any one party. It is about the people of Northern Ireland and delivering a peaceful and normal society.

One of the things we want is a real political realignment, a shift to a different political spectrum, such as you enjoy, or not, in Britain. The question of the "other" is problematic. But the Agreement could not have been made without that kind of guarantee being given to people who feel very strongly about their identity. The newer voices did lose out. We are one of those who lost out, but we are still supporting the Agreement despite this.

RT: What do you think has led to this agreement

being made?

KF: From the republican side, at least with Sinn Fein, there has been a steady progression towards this point from the mid-80s. But it has taken a long time to persuade others that they were going down that path.

RT: Do you think that any particular economic questions or factors played a role? For example, compared to the past, when living standards were better in the North, Gross Domestic Product per head is now higher in the South. Most transnational investment is going to the South.

KF: I am not sure if that is precisely the case. The Catholic community that was previously discriminated against, certainly in the early 70s, has made great advances. Access to higher education has a great deal to do with that. There has been an increase in the number of Catholics participating in the work force and in the higher echelons of the work force.

There is also a great decline in what were seen as traditionally Protestant industries; the shipyards, the linen trade and others. Where previously if you were a Protestant you were guaranteed a job in the shipyard, now you find that you are in the same situation the nationalist community has been in for years. A growth in the Catholic middle class would be another factor, as some looked around and said they didn't need the shipyards because they had a degree or they had a professional qualification or they were barristers, and so on.

RT: Has there been a certain levelling down as far as the working class is concerned?

KF: This is one of the big issues. There was a debate about this on the Shankill Road [the unionist stronghold] the other night. A guy from the Democratic Unionist Party went on and on about the extent to which the Irish language is in the Agreement. But people from the Shankill said, let them worry about that, the people who want to speak Irish. What we are worried about is the kids here who can't even speak English properly. For example in the Shankill only 3 percent pass their 11+ exam. That's the situation you are dealing with. Those communities are trying to regenerate themselves and education is playing a key role. It is an uphill battle. In a sense, because the nationalist community had to stand on their own feet, they've been much better equipped to climb up the social ladder.

RT: The policy of the Labour government in Britain is that "welfare is not an option". There is probably no place so dependent on welfare payments as here in the North. What are the implications of Labour's policy?

KF: A huge part of the budget for Northern Ireland goes on social security payments. The Agreement will bring greater investment and greater numbers of jobs. The work force here is, in general terms, a highly educated and skilled work force, maybe not as mobile as it should be, but similar in character to the work force in the South, and that obviously attracts investment.

RT: The Labour Government announced it is planning large investments in Northern Ireland. Do you believe that the majority of society here will see any benefits from that investment?

KF: I am a little worried about where that money will actually be placed. If it is going entirely into industry we shall have difficulty with that. Part of the direction of our negotiations was persuading the government of the importance of underpinning community infrastructure and development because that will stabilise society. The economy is hugely important, but we are going to have to look after people as well.

RT: What do think the situation here is going to look like here in five years' time?

I would like to see the beginnings of a shift in the political alignment--a shift away from orange and green to right and left. And in 10 years time I can see mergers in different parties. They will all split up with the left of the SDLP, the left of the DUP, PUP and all different parties breaking up. People say to us, "You are a single issue party". But every other party in Northern Ireland is a single issue party! Every other party is a coalition of liberal and right views on a whole range of issues. So the finger pointing at us should be also pointing at them. There is a very interesting time ahead.



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