Designation of Parties for the Forthcoming Election in Northern Ireland
A Response by The Northern Ireland Women's European Platform on Behalf of Women in Northern Ireland

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Women's European Platform wishes to comment on the Government's consultation paper particularly on the matters of
- designation of parties
- composition of party lists
- selection of negotiation teams
- Forum committees and chairing of business

Before making its points the Platform would draw attention to two particular abstracts, the first in the consultative paper on Designation of Parties for the Forthcoming Election in Northern Ireland, the second on the paper prepared by Her Majesty's Government The Framework for a Broadly Acceptable Elective Process Leading to All Party Negotiations.

The Platform draws attention to Section 6 in the consultative paper where it states
- the list in the legislation should be as inclusive as possible of parties likely to be able to attract a significant degree of support
- the need to avoid very long lists of parties, many new to voters, which might serve to confuse.

The Platform also draws attention to Section 8 in the paper by Her Majesty's Government
- the negotiation should be conducted on as inclusive a basis as is compatible with democratic principles
- a fair and balanced system must therefore be identified which would secure broad acceptance across the community.

The Platform is concerned to ensure that
- electors have as wide a choice as possible across the community in relation to this election
- the electorate is not constrained by the traditional party political choices
- a fair and balanced system includes a fair gender representation as well as a fair representation of religious and political difference.

Designation of Parties

The Platform is disappointed that the Secretary of State has chosen to list only the traditional political parties. In particular the Platform wishes to support views which have been expressed that the Government could have adopted a more imaginative approach to the non constituency seats in this election ie the twenty seats which will be allocated to the ten most successful parties under the Government's proposal. The Platform feels that the Government missed an opportunity to introduce other representative bodies into the negotiation and consultation process on the future direction of our society in Northern Ireland.
The Government having chosen to list parties which can participate in the election at this point, the Platform wishes to strongly impress on the Government the need to add further parties to the list. In particular, the Platform would point out the serious absence of women in party politics and while further on in this submission we suggest how that might be addressed, it is important to note that many women who have been active over the last twenty-five years find great difficulty in joining what they regard as a sectionalised or sectarian political party. The Platform urges the Government to include a space on the list of designated parties for a Women's Network or Women's Caucus to run in the election.

Composition of Party Lists

The Platform notes that party constituency lists must be published by the parties in advance of the election. For the Northern Ireland constituency under which the ten most successful parties will each secure two elected representatives party lists must also be published in advance. These points clearly meet the submission which the Platform made in March on Gender Proofing the Election System and the Talks Fora.

However the Platform believes that this does not go far enough. The Platform would reiterate that each political party list should be composed of equal numbers of men and women and the listed names should be alternately male and female to ensure equal numbers of men and women being slotted into seats. In the event of the parties declaring that they are able to persuade sufficient women candidates to stand the parties should alternate women and men on their lists until the number of women standing is exhausted; and choose alternately men and women for their quota of seats until no further women candidates remain.

Selection of Negotiation Teams

Parties should ensure when they select their negotiation teams that women are equally represented on these teams for the key political talks. Delegations from each party to key meetings to negotiate future arrangements should include equal numbers of women and men.

Forum Committees and Chairing of Business

The Platform notes that under Section 17 in the paper by Her Majesty's Government the Forum will have the ability to establish committees to consider specific issues. The Platform urges that any such Forum committees should be equally composed of women and men. In addition the chairs of any such committees should equally be distributed to women and men.

It is noted that no proposal has been made in the paper as to the chair of the Forum. The Platform believes that women should have equal opportunity with men in chairing the main Forum plenaries and business. The Platform would go further and propose that, should the Forum be mainly composed of men despite the Platform's representations, the chair of the Forum should be a women.
Conclusion

In order to ensure equal opportunity for women in the election process the Platform urges the Government to impress on all political parties the need to take action now to encourage and positively recruit women to put themselves forward for selection. The Government should ensure that a clear equal opportunity selection process is adhered to by all the parties.

The Platform believes that it is essential that the working arrangements for the Forum and the Negotiations should be published urgently. Working hours should be clear and limited to reasonable times to ensure that those with domestic responsibilities can participate. The Platform insists that a childcare centre should be established for the use of the elected representatives and that this fact is made known to parties in advance of the selection process for election. The Platform notes that in Section 22 of the paper of Her Majesty's Government "The Bill will also provide for elected representatives to receive an appropriate allowance in respect of attendance at the Forum and the negotiations." The Platform wishes to state clearly that child and dependent care allowances should be the first priority in determining expenditure for representatives, and this fact should be made known to parties well in advance of their selection of candidates.

The Platform ends this response by reiterating its first essential point ie the list of parties selected to participate in the election should be extended. In particular space should be left for a Women's Network or Women's Caucus to run candidates in the election.

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10 April 1996