A Women's Party Outwits the System in

by Nell McCafferty

L'auteure reconte la mise sur pied de la Coalition des femmes de l'Irlande du Nord (NIWC) et sa rapide accession à la table des pour parlers pour la paix avec tous les partis.

The story of how women got their place at the table is as astonishing as the election itself was bizarre.

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was founded in April 1996. It campaigned for a slot on the electoral list in May. In June, victorious, its representatives took their seats at all-party peace talks, which were designed to bring to an end more than 800 years of conflict between Britain and Ireland. It took the women less than seven weeks to get themselves right up there with the big boys. Their success is all the more stunning given that Northern Ireland, which is still under British rule, was, until the coalition swept in, the virtual political preserve of men. Ireland has President Mary Robinson. Britain broke the mold with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, but Northern Ireland has almost always returned an all-male panel of politicians to the British and European parliaments. Until the coalition came along, the dreary integrity of the quarrel between feminism and patriarchy in the North seemed destined to remain forever intact, unchanged, and unchangeable. Even as Britain's war with the Irish Republican Army (IRA) stumbled to a close in August 1994, it seemed that women would not have a voice in the peace-time settlement.

The story of how the women got their place at the table is as astonishing as the election itself was bizarre. The election, which brought the women unprecedented political status, had been called in order to determine who would be present at the renewed peace negotiations. After decades of virtual exclusion from official peace talks, a group of women saw their chance to be included. Avila Kilmurray, finance officer for the NIWC, told the *Irish Echo*: "The motivation was that most of us had experience working on equality issues in Ireland for 20 years and that by doing this we would probably achieve more in a short space of time than writing letters and lobbying and campaigning for the next 20 years."

What brought about the revolutionary change? Says NIWC press officer Annie Campbell: "A bizarre accident. The rules of the election to peace talks in Northern Ireland were sick. They were rigged by the British government to ensure that a tiny minority of paramilitary representatives got seats at the table, and we saw our chance to be included as a minority too. We seized the day. To that extent, we were brilliant."

While the women in the NIWC are both Catholic and Protestant, the major parties continued to reflect Northern Ireland's traditional religious divisions, with Protestants voting for unionist parties, which want to maintain the link with Britain, and Catholics voting for nationalist parties, which support a united Ireland. While the major parties loyal to Britain were secured a place at the table, it was the militant paramilitary element of the unionists, known as loyalists, that Britain feared would garner too few votes to get a seat at the talks. Newly in from the cold, this faction had performed disastrously in the past. Britain believed that without the endorsement of this armed faction, there would be no lasting resolution.

Confronted with the certainty that these Protestant paramilitaries would not win even one of the 90 seats available at the elected forum from which delegates were chosen, the British devised a byzantine plan in which each of the top ten parties would be given two seats at the table. The only trick was to garner enough votes to make the top ten.

The women saw that the election could be used as a Trojan horse for their own entry into the talks. Says founding NIWC member Bronagh Hinds: "When we looked over previous election results of the smaller parties, we discovered that the one which came in tenth had won only 1,800 votes, from an electorate of nearly half a million. We figured we could not but surpass that, should nobody vote for us but our relatives."

Add Hinds: "A group of women came together to study the British government proposals on the election and saw at once that women and cross-community groups would be locked out of the system" since the British election scheme was limited to established parties. "Those parties," she says, "have traditionally excluded women and relied on monolithic thinking which perpetuated the sectarian divide."

Hinds, along with fellow activists Monica McWilliams, a Catholic who lectures in social policy at the University of Ulster and who is now co-chair of the NIWC at the peace talks, sent a fax to the British government, protesting the fact that a coalition not yet formed would be denied entry to the electoral list.

The next day they received a response saying that the election guidelines had been amended. The women had only ten days to register enough candidates to assure the coalition the minimum number of votes. NIWC co-chair Pearl Sagar, a Protestant from a working-class unionist background, recalls, "We issued a public invitation and the phone started hopping."

As director of the Ulster People's

Northern Ireland

College for adult education, Hinds had anticipated the election and initiated a new curriculum at the beginning of 1996, training nationalist and unionist party members in the "profession of politics." Ironically, when the election to peace talks was called, she found herself running against some of the very people she had trained.

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The coalition treated the election as a matter of stuffing bodies into as many places as possible, with few questions asked about credentials. None of the potential candidates were grilled on their politics, since the coalition, Hinds says, "is dedicated to drawing together the different views, ideas, and opinions to achieve a workable solution." Annie Campbell, a 40-year-old feminist, researcher for women's centres in Belfast, mother of two, and a nominal Protestant from a unionist background, pithily translates this as: "We didn't have an answer to the problem. We campaigned on the basis that the answer would come out of talk, negotiation, an exchange of views, and a heartfelt desire not to put a gun to anyone's head."

After the ballots had been counted, the NIWC attracted a mere 1.2 per cent of the vote, but, as Hinds cheerfully points out, the coalition came in ninth out of the top ten parties and thus got its two seats at the table.

Even those of us who have been feminists since the movement for women's liberation washed ashore in Ireland from the U.S. in the 1970s could not have predicted that an exclusively women's party could achieve success.

"That's an accident, too," says Annie Campbell. "No men applied when we advertised for candidates for election. If they had, or if the media had accused us of excluding them, or had the law been checked to see if we were breaking laws against discrimination, or had we taken time ourselves to examine our conscience, given our manifesto of inclusive politics...." But there was little time, less interest, and, crucially, no expectation, except among the NIWC women, that they would succeed. "I felt brilliant about it, walking in there with the women, and sick about the ones who were excluded because of the way [the election] was organized," says Campbell, "but we didn't organize the rules. The thing is, we can change them now to make sure everyone has a say in the final outcome." Campbell is referring to groups such as the Green Party environmentalists who couldn't cobble an electoral panel together.

The seeds for the NIWC were not sown eight months ago, but rather more than 800 years ago, when the English took over Scotland and Wales, later renaming the entire island Great Britain. The English then invaded the neighbouring island of Ireland, and called the entire domain the British Isles. The only thing held in common by all was Roman Catholicism. After Martin Luther nailed his protest against Catholic church corruption to the cathedral door in Germany, and Henry VIII of England was denied the first of his many divorces by the pope, Britain became Protestant in culture, while Ireland remained Catholic. It wasn't until 1921, after seven centuries of armed struggle, that the 26 southern counties of Ireland, which had a majority Catholic character, won independence. The other six, which had been successfully colonized by the British (who sent Scottish Protestants to dilute the resident Catholic majority), were retained for strategic reasons. The six counties were given their own Belfast-based regional parliament, known as Stormont, which was subject to control from the House of Commons in London. Stormont was infamously described by Sir James Craig, the first prime minister of Northern Ireland and the mastermind of the annexation of that country, as "a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people." It lived up to its name. Between 1921 and 1968, when it revolted under the banner of a civil rights movement, the Catholic minority suffered ferocious discrimination. The civil rights movement was beaten off the streets by Stormont's armed police force. The IRA, declaring the Northern statelet to be irredeemable, rose to fill the vacuum and claimed that the solution lay in a united Ireland, free of British and unionist control. Britain responded by abolishing Stormont in 1974 and instituting direct rule from London.

The nascent feminist movement foundered and split on the rock of the war that was waged from 1969 to 1994. Women found themselves morally impelled to take sides, for or against the union with Britain, for or against the IRA, for or against the British army, for or against a united Ireland, for or against loyalist paramilitary forces, for or against the local, heavily armed, mainly Protestant police force, for or against unionist politicians, for or against Irish nationalist politicians. The traditional concerns of feminism—jobs, money, power, and family—got little attention until the mid-1980s when, exhausted, women's groups met across

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the sectarian divide and decided to leave the war outside the rooms where they met, while they established a common ground on such issues as domestic violence. Few of the NIWC members had been in the women's peace movement, though all of them understood that they had become virtual handmaidens to the men who led the politics of war.

Many of the women had cut their political teeth by travelling south to the residence of Ireland's president, Mary Robinson, who had come to power on a wave of community politics that transcended narrow party interests. Robinson was instrumental in forging links between women's groups North and South. While the North was convulsed in war, feminists in the southern republic had been merrily engaged in changing the social agenda. They were so successfully at the forefront in breaking the institutional links between church and state that Ireland has lost its monolithic Catholic character. The bottom lines of legalized contraception, divorce, and homosexuality have been secured. (Abortion is legal only under certain circumstances.) During the last elections in the South, the number of women elected to the Dail (the Irish parliament) rose from eight per cent to 12 per cent.

Northern women who go south to study this phenomenon frequently make the journey from Robinson's residence to that of U.S. Ambassador to Ireland Jean Kennedy Smith. Smith has been very energetic in facilitating northern feminism and ensuring that a steady stream of women from there go frequently to the U.S. to network, thus playing a huge part in seeing that a feminist cornerstone for the peace talks was laid. Until the NIWC made the breakthrough, "we were like political refugees in the North, without status," says Annie Campbell.

But the formation of the NIWC inadvertently introduced to this tattered region yet another schism. Marie Mulholland, coordinator of the Women's Support Network (WSN), an umbrella for more than 20 women's groups in Belfast, actually issued a statement disassociating the group from the NIWC. Anxious not to have the press portray the rift as a "cat fight," Mulholland stated simply that the WSN did not want to compromise its political autonomy by backing *any* political party. But in fact, she has grave doubts about the NIWC.

"The coalition is too broad," she says, "and there's no consensus of opinion on any of the issues affecting Northern Ireland. The only consensus is that women should stand for elections."

Mulholland argues that her members come from economically deprived areas of Belfast. "They're from both loyalist and republican ghettos, and they're the ones most affected by the conflict," she says. The NIWC, Mulholland claims, is made up primarily of academics who "are colluding with a system that was from the beginning weighted against radical organizations, and there's nothing in the talks process that's of any benefit to our constituencies."

In fact, a number of NIWC members are working-class, including Pearl Sagar; May Blood, who's from a militant loyalist ghetto; and Brenda Callaghan, who is a trade union organizer.

While the WSN and the NIWC may not see eye to eye, there are areas of agreement and a bond as women. Says Mulholland: "I've heard that the women at the peace talks are being given a hard time as individuals. No women should have to take verbal abuse." But the attacks were more than verbal. After a particularly heated debate, John Taylor, the deputy leader of the largest party in Northern Ireland, the Ulster Unionist Party, shoved Monica McWilliams against a wall as she approached him to continue the discussion.

Mulholland wants the NIWC to pull out of the talks: "The coalition is in a corner. If they stay longer, they give validity to the talks. If they come out, the British and Irish governments will have to come up with a new structure, and we'll have a better chance to get a new initiative." Referring to the talks as a corpse, she says, "I've declared it dead, while Annie Campbell thinks she can breathe life into it."

Campbell counters: "I understand and respect the depth of feelings of anger over which can appear to be a facade [the peace talks], but we had to take advantage of this opportunity. We're the only ones pushing for inclusion for everyone—even Sinn Fein [the political wing of the IRA] without a cease-fire."

When Campbell arrived at the venue in Belfast on the eve of the peace talks to have her photograph taken for a security pass, she had her two children in tow. "Ah," said John Taylor, looking at the children, "there's the Women's Coalition. This is the sort of thing we can expect."

Though she is a fierce, bonny fighter, with an explosive personality, Campbell did not take umbrage. It's not that she was humble about the coalition, with just 1.2 per cent of the vote, sliding into the talks with Taylor's dominant Ulster Unionist Party, which had won 30 per cent. It was that Taylor, a wealthy father of six, was absolutely right. Child care, and the fact that one in three children in Northern Ireland are affected by poverty, would assuredly be two of the many items that the men could expect on the agenda, a puzzlement to the patriarchs in the neighbouring countries of Britain and Ireland.

But while negotiations continued at the table, violence continued in the streets. The Windsor Women's Centre was firebombed in the early hours of September 13th, 1996. Though, at press time, no one had taken responsibility, the attack is presumed to be the work of loyalist paramilitaries angered by a visit from Irish President Mary Robinson the day before. "It's the first time a women's centre has been targetted," says Annie Campbell, "but that reflects the very progressive approach women's centres have taken regarding cross-cultural dialogue."

In addition, the peace talks are currently in crisis over the majority's refusal to let Sinn Fein sit at the negotiating table. Though it had won a

sensational victory at the elections, coming in as the fourth largest party, with 15 per cent of the vote, Sinn Fein's entry to the talks has been denied until the IRA renews its cease-fire.

Meanwhile, loyalist parties that—in terms of actual votes garnered—fared as modestly as the NIWC, also are at the table, talking on behalf of pro-British paramilitary organizations that have reportedly violated their own cease-fire agreements. Equally serious, unionist parties have engaged in a giant filibuster designed to stall altogether talks about "an agreed Ireland" free of British control.

Clearly, the way ahead will be difficult. But, says Annie Campbell, "Women in Northern Ireland have finally got options to consider." For the moment she revels in the absolute luxury of that.

An Update on the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition

What has happened in the last year? The parties to the talks have managed to secure agreement over the Rules of Procedure which will govern the talks for their duration. They also reached agreement on the items for the opening agenda which is yet to be completed due to a blockage over decommissioning. The parties were in recess for the month of August and returned early in September to resolve decommissioning before moving on to substantive discussions.

How did the party do in recent Northern Ireland elections? In the election to talks held in May 1996, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) came ninth as a party and thus was entitled, being among the top ten parties, to two seats with a back-up team of three to the talks. In less than a year since its inception the Women's Coalition fought two further elections, the 1997 general election and the 1997 local government election. The Women's Coalition more than doubled the vote it had received in the previous talks election of 1996.

In the local council elections the Women's Coalition ran 20 candidates spread across nine of Northern Ireland's 26 local councils. The Coalition was pleased to record success with the election of a councillor to Down District Council; her name is Anne Carr. Anne has long worked for peace and reconciliation through Women Together, is an active member of the Women's Coalition, and has a sound track record of work on local issues.

Does the party have a seat in the peace process? The Women's Coalition's seats to the talks for peace and political stability are secured through the election of 1996. The Coalition continues to have its two seats at the table and its back-up team of three.

What does it see as its current role? The Women's Coalition had a very clear view of its role when it sought to contest the election to talks and continues to hold this in pursuing its policy at the talks table. The Women's Coalition has twin goals of: (1) including women in the negotiations on the future of Northern Ireland and, (2) achieving a political accommodation. One of the Coalition's ongoing roles is to provide opportunity for women to engage with the political process.

The Women's Coalition sees itself as a catalyst for change, and as a main protector of the need for inclusive and meaningful talks which really address the substantive issues on which we need to achieve an accommodation. The Women's Coalition also plays a part in ensuring that there is external consultation with a wider number of groups representing the community, women, trade unions, business interests, churches, and others, and that the views of these organizations are taken account of and fed into any talks process.

The Women's Coalition also pays particular attention to process and dynamics. The Coalition often "interprets" for others to ensure that differences in position are clear and can be addressed as such, without conflict being exacerbated by confusion over communication or use of language. The Coalition also continues to address outmoded antagonistic, sectarian, and sexist behaviour which is frequently used as a tool by some parties to avoid substantive discussion and political progress. The Women's Coalition continues to play its part in building cross-party agreement, particularly through regular meetings of the four smaller parties at the talks. While having its own ideas the Coalition also acts as honest broker in attempting to bridge some of the political divides within the talks.

—May Blood