

## **On Vital Voices in Northern Ireland**

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**Speech by Liz O'Donnell on Vital Voices in Northern Ireland**

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**WOMEN IN POLITICS: VITAL VOICES IN IRELAND  
BY LIZ O'DONNELL, T.D.**

Good Afternoon,

I am very glad to be here today in such a feminised environment. My daily work place - the Dáil is anything but that - with only 22 women in a chamber of 166.

I became involved in politics in 1991, through my involvement in the Women's Political Association. I could see the negative effects of public policy decisions from which women were excluded and became convinced that more women were urgently needed at decision and policy making levels locally and nationally. All issues are women's issues. Every decision taken by government that impact on the population affects women. In my view, a democracy is deficient if women do not have adequate representation in the body politic. Our voices have to be heard at regional, national and international level, of public life. How else can we ensure that the impact of decisions on women is anticipated and feel confident that the female perspective and aspirations for society are taken into account?

I would go as far as to say that key policy decisions taken without women's input and perspective lack credibility and democratic authority.

Nowadays, most Irish women can aspire to a life without limits. In modern Ireland, the vast majority of Irish women have access to education, to employment, to contraception, to healthcare, to legislative support - to choice on how to live their lives. Women now have a legal entitlement to equal pay for equal work. Women no longer have to choose between gainful employment and marriage. Pregnancy and maternity leave are protected - We can now aim for top jobs formerly the preserve of men - we want to and can handle the complexities, which flow. In politics, women are more visible than ever before although numerically stuck at the same level since 1992. We have an elected woman President, Mary McAleese our second since the founding of the State, and in 1997, Mary Harney, T.D. my Party Leader, became the first woman Deputy Prime Minister. There are 3 women Ministers around the cabinet table. There are 32 female members in the Oireachtas (22 in Dáil and 10 in Senate).

But the struggle for representation of women in public life is far from over. Only 13.25% of the members of the Dáil are women and the critical mass of women in politics needed to sufficiently 'feminise' politics is still a long way off. The fact is that political life is neither woman nor family friendly. It is tailor-made for men with supportive wives. It is rare for a woman, born outside of a political dynasty, to be enthusiastic about entering the fray of

public life and to voluntarily embrace an increasingly hostile and difficult working environment which can be destructive of families and so pervasive of one's life.

I have been a TD now for ten years. Five years of that I had the privilege of being a Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs. In that capacity I was a member of the Government negotiating team in the multi party talks leading to the Good Friday Agreement.

Thankfully, women played influential parts in drafting and negotiating that Agreement. The Irish and British teams each had a woman Minister and elected women in all parties played key roles. Whatever about our traditional difficulties in the Republic, women in Northern Ireland had been very much marginalized from mainstream political life. Few had the stomach for the combative and name-calling bigotry, which for too long passed for politics in Northern Ireland. But some hardy souls did prevail in that hostile territory and over the tough years of the troubles made a huge difference. I was delighted to see when the First Assembly in Northern Ireland convened, they had voted to give women fourteen of the 108 seats - not enough but a good start. Northern Ireland needs women in that Assembly to feminise the body politic and to neutralise or moderate the rather aggressive, name calling and often abusive style of politics, which had become the norm there. Healing, reconciliation and tolerance of difference is the key to bedding down the peace and the new political arrangements.

The recent phenomenon of the Celtic Tiger now recognised as running from 1994 to 2001 has transformed Ireland. Women have been central to that economic transformation. The number of women entering the labour force and taking their rightful place in the world of business is growing. Nearly 5% of enterprises in Ireland are owned by women. More and more women are joining the labour force. Women make up 49% of the labour force. Ten years ago, that was less than 36%. So while women are present in large numbers throughout the professions, and in all walks of life, their scarcity in public life is a cause of concern. We need to have more women managing the tensions and grappling with the dilemmas of rapid change in our society.

By any measure, we are witness to an historic acceleration in the pace of change in Ireland - economically, socially, culturally, demographically and politically. In each area, we seem to have moved from low to high gear. Our problems too have changed dramatically - from mass unemployment to labour bottlenecks; from emigration to immigration; from greater inward investment to the diversion of investment to BMW regions; from high taxation to adjudicating on how low they can go; from condemning violence in Northern Ireland to navigating the political complexities of a peace process.

Think of the priorities that have dominated Irish politics for the last thirty years - resolving the problems of the North and relieving poverty and economic stagnation. These have, at times, been an oppressively focused set of objectives. Looking back, few achievements of the past decade shine more brightly, or are threatened by darker forces than the peace process.

If making war can bring out the worst in people, I found first hand that making peace brings out the best. I saw how all the Northern Ireland party leaders involved in the negotiations transcended themselves to reach a kind of greatness.

They each displayed rare courage not in confronting each other as is their wont but in leading their parties into the uncharted territory of mutual accommodation - thereby evacuating of necessity, cherished positions - positions for which too many people had killed and been killed.

Whatever about the tortuous negotiations leading to the Agreement, we have had real problems in the implementation phase and they are likely to continue for a time. But what is important is that they are in the main, political problems. The stuff of real politics - difficult but solvable - by dialogue, pressure, drafting and diplomacy.

We can accept that the Sinn Fein leadership has struggled - with great skill - to move its constituency from war to peace and politics and yet still say that the peace process rightly demands more from them or at least sufficient to move politics in Northern Ireland from serial crises to control, from uncertainty to certainty.

But all the pro-agreement parties deserve our appreciation for helping to define a New Ireland for a new century where we have peace not war, handshakes not handguns. Who have allowed us bring, even in a yet fragile way closure, to our vexed history on the island.

The Good Friday Agreement has withstood the repeated turbulence of the emerging peace. It is an ambitious project by any measure. There has been progress on so many fronts - enhanced cross border cooperation, demilitarisation, human rights reinforced, a new vision for policing, reduced levels of violence, even some movement on the question of paramilitary arms. All of this progress delivered by the art of politics and diplomacy.

But not progress enough or not quickly enough to satisfy the person who looks to one issue or one set of issues. The project was never for the fainthearted or the short-sighted.

I profoundly believe that time; stamina and holding to the blue print of the Good Friday Agreement will carry us through. Perhaps the greatest validation of the Agreement as a political contract is that neither republican nor unionist dissidents have produced a convincing alternative - or indeed are ever likely to. The boundaries of the Good Friday Agreement are defined by the people's endorsement. Those of us who are Pro-Agreement, North and South, as a political tribe must defend and revisit its exclusive prescriptions for peace and a new future on this island.

We have just been through a very rocky few months in the peace process with strain showing on a number of fronts. There have been very damaging and destabilising allegations about ongoing paramilitary activity whether in Stormont gate, Castlereagh or Colombia, which have drained and almost emptied the reservoir of goodwill and confidence amongst the unionist community. This erosion of confidence is extremely dangerous. The whole project, the whole settlement envisages a cross community devolved government, which by its nature cannot be forced. So confidence amongst the unionist community who are pro agreement must be won back and sustained.

At the same time, the experience of nationalists in the operation of the institutions of the Agreement has led to strong misgivings on their part. From their perspective, the Institutions appear to be subject to the whim of unionism; they feel their efforts have been frustrated by the refusal of some unionists to participate in the inclusive Executive or in elements of the Agreement itself.

The sense is also growing in some places that the unionist veto, so much part of the folk mythology of so many versions of our fragmented history is again making itself felt.

The shadowy and murky world of collusion between elements in the security forces and paramilitaries, which optimists among us hoped might be proved unfounded, or very limited in scope, also emerged in horrifying relief in recent weeks. The shocking revelations of the Stevens Report confirming that the murders of innocent people by loyalist paramilitaries could have been prevented collided in our minds with the alleged actions a security forces agent within the republican movement.

In short, we have been confronted by a nasty vista, which has the power to destabilise and poison relations not only between parties and communities in Northern Ireland but between that most important partnership in the peace process, between the British and Irish Governments. So the challenge now is to how to navigate our way through the hazards ahead, which threaten to overcome our perspective. To a large extent, the framework for progress is in place in order to restore momentum.

Firstly, a framework already exists by way of the recently published Joint Declaration of the two governments so work should start on that immediately.

Secondly, the Assembly Elections so vital to the democratic process should take place in the autumn come what may. The delay or postponement of any election is never undertaken lightly. One can understand the reasons advanced for it on this occasion. However, the effect of the postponement has been to drain political energy from the process, leaving a dangerous vacuum of despondency.

Thirdly and most importantly of all, in my view, the parties themselves must really engage with each other and take more responsibility for their own destiny.

In the past we have used independent experts such as Senator George Mitchell, an outside voice and hand to guide the parties to a space where accommodation could be found. But I believe the time has come for the parties and the individuals within those parties to really take ownership and responsibility for sorting out their differences. I believe they must revisit the spirit of compromise, trust and goodwill, which so informed and transformed the negotiations leading up to the Agreement five years ago. The scale of change for good in Northern Ireland made in those five years has been so breathtaking that it has raised all our expectations. That higher level requires more from paramilitary organisations than five years ago; what is needed is for them to go out of business entirely. It also requires more in terms of maturity, risk and engagement from politicians on all sides. No one party has exclusive responsibility for the present difficulties. The resolution can only be found collectively and with compromise. Women across all the parties and in civil society can perhaps make a critical contribution by way of mediation skills, which appear sadly lacking

at the moment in the process. Recent discourse would suggest an unfortunate back-sliding into combative polarisation and absolute positions rather than the middle ground of compromise.

I cannot help but wonder would the road to peace have been such a protracted 'white knuckle ride' as David Trimble calls it, had there been more women 'about the place' as Martin McGuinness would say?