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ADDRESS TO
LABOUR WOMEN'S NATIONAL COUNCIL
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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

A look at any aspect of legislation in Ireland must immediately take cognisance of the fact that there are two legislative jurisdictions. In examining aspects of social legislation this fact cannot simply be read as a territorial or administrative comparison. The existence of two jurisdictions, the divisions which gave rise to them and the prejudices and fears which have such a bearing on their political life have done much to shape social legislation in Ireland. Perhaps in some matters I should say "to stop" social legislation in Ireland.

Surveying the history of the two jurisdictions can anyone seriously question the evidence of confessionalism in both? In both we have seen a prevailing concern that laws should reflect the ethos of the majority. We have had protestant laws for a protestant state and we have had the special position of the Catholic Church.

It was inevitable, given that partition was based on a sectarian headcount that this should be so. Among the motive forces which led to the process of partition was the desire to show independence of identity and to assert or protect values and traditions. Separation, domination, governance and legislation all became means to those ends. Legislation was used not simply to regulate aspects of community life but to reflect certain values. It was used as much as a badge to proclaim a particular set of values as it was a shield to protect the needs of society as a whole.

Given the particular religious traditions of Irish Society these factors served to paralyse any real prospect of pluralism. In this atmosphere the delivery of any progressive change becomes slow. I have made the observation before that many of the world's trouble spots all share the distinction of having deeply religious convictions. It seems to me that the moral certitudes inculcated in people of strong religious influence makes it more difficult for them to accept compromise. People find themselves reliant on certain absolutes and therefore less sensitive to the real complexity of situations. Where people find their attitudes governed by particular nostrums, they all too often in turn want their whole society governed by those same nostrums. They find it hard to draw the line between personal observance and political ordinance. I do not have to list the many examples of this in Ireland.

Our task in Ireland is to accommodate diversity. To realise that we are not threatened by the difference of others but we are threatened by intolerance. The SDLP has always sought to address the fundamental problem of the division of the Irish people and the political, social and economic fall-out from our failure to resolve that division by creating an acceptance of diversity. We welcome the Anglo-Irish Agreement as a step forward in the process of reconciliation and political development which is needed to build a new Ireland. We do not particularly seek that new Ireland as an end in itself, for the satisfaction of nationalism. We seek it as the achievement of an open, pluralist ^{society} which we can address fully the need for social and economic progress.

That being said we cannot afford to await a new Ireland before we address many of the pressing areas of social legislation and social provision. In particular many of the issues and problems which affect women, although not exclusively, must be addressed and treated in their own right. I reject the line that says treatment of these problems is conditional upon some new political arrangement. I also reject the line which offers treatment of these problems as a primary means of moving towards a new political arrangement in Ireland. I have no doubt that progress on such issues would contribute to a better climate of understanding but it should not be simply on the basis of such considerations that we should pursue certain changes in social legislation. *

I must say that I find a level of political immaturity for instance, in the line that says the South should introduce new legislation on marital breakdown to assuage Unionist opinion in the North. These problems should be legislated for because they need to be legislated for. Change should be made not for appearances to others but to offer improvement to those who find themselves injured by current arrangements. It is offensive to those in circumstances of marital breakdown to hear a treatment of this very real human issue almost ignore them and their needs. It is also quite patronising to Northern Protestants.

Just as it is wrong that the Confessionalism sustained by partition has stifled a proper and open legislative approach to such issues as marital breakdown and family planning so too is it wrong for approaches on such issues now to feel they have to cover themselves as a means towards ending partition.

It is not for me to go too deeply into questions which might be a matter of some party political difference in the South. However, as a northerner I would make the observation that I and hundreds of thousands of Catholics live in a jurisdiction where there is divorce, where there is full legal access to family planning and where schools give sex education. This has not threatened anybody's Catholicism. Indeed it has not particularly offended anybody's Catholicism. I have not yet heard a Catholic Bishop in the North say that his flock were poorer Catholics than those in the South because of the differences in legislation.

You will all have heard the SDLP described as "a mainly Catholic" party. I will not now give you a detailed rejection of that description. It is noteworthy however, that when we were in office in the power-sharing executive in 1974 it was we who extended the availability of family planning services on the National Health Service. There was more concern in Unionist quarters about this move than among our own supporters.

Similarly in January 1985 the SDLP annual Conference adopted a motion supporting a change in the divorce law. The change we wanted was that in uncontested divorce cases the parties should only have to submit written affidavits instead of having to appear in court. We feel that the court procedure is of itself adversarial and so can generate bitterness which can influence— ? alimony, child custody and property arrangements. It also creates an aura of guilt which compounds the obvious trauma involved. The only people who gain from the present law are lawyers. Some weeks later the same proposal was before the Northern Ireland Assembly. They rejected it on the grounds that it was too liberal etc.

As you can see labels can be misleading. No doubt you have many arguments about the label "women's issues". Is divorce a women's issue? Is family planning a women's issue? Is sex education a women's issue? Is rape law a women's issue? Unquestionably they are issues of profound concern to women. They are far from being of exclusive concern to women. Unfortunately all too often they are treated or ignored as such. Of themselves these are not solely women's issues but in political terms they have become women's issues because women are more prepared to deal with them. Experience has told you that you have to be.

In the North the label "women's issue" is not readily applied in the same way as in the South. This is not because issues which have particular concerns for women do not exist, but because of the different legislative climate. I feel it is important to identify some of the issues which the SDLP is pursuing.

Women in the north have benefitted in several ways under the provision of the Welfare State, although the system also has many anomalies which penalise women. The proposed Social Security Bill which you have heard something off already will penalise women on several counts particularly when taken in the context of other changes.

The devaluation of Child Benefit which is paid to the mother will clearly make things more difficult for women managing a domestic budget. The evidence shows that there is a fairer distribution of domestic resources where significant benefit is paid to the mother. Similarly the supplement to low waged families Family Income Supplement is to be replaced by a system called Family Credit. Like Child Benefit, F I S is usually paid to the mother. The new Family Credit, however, will be paid in the wage packet. Basically there will be less benefit and it will transfer from the purse to the wallet. We have no doubt that this will intensify the deprivation of many women and their children.

It is somewhat ironic that the Thatcher approach in Social Security tends to be that dependency on the state is a vice. In relation to women however it seems to be that dependency on a man is a virtue.

The SDLP do not dispute the need to reform the Social Security system. Not least because there has been such a change in the situation of women since it was established in the 1940's when few married women worked outside the home. Social Security provision was designed on the basis that a woman was dependent on her husband for financial support.

The Fowler review, however, retracts some of the gains made during the life of the Welfare State towards giving women an adequate independent income. The government ignored the submissions and recommendations of many groups who treat and represent the problems of families and of women.

The government are raising the maternity grant from £25 (set in 1969) to £75. But it will no longer be universally available but will be means tested. This has been identified as a precedent which could threaten universal child benefit. I believe that provision for maternity is fundamental to the welfare of future generations and must be based on health and welfare — provision for all pregnant women and their babies and income replacement during maternity.

At present Supplementary Benefit allows payment of various maternity needs such as different clothing, cot, pram, baby clothes, bedding etc under the single payment system. This support is obviously of some comfort to women on low incomes. Single payments however, are to be replaced by a cash-limited social fund, grants from which will usually have to be repaid. Obviously this jeopardises the welfare of many women and their children. The offensive nature of the fund, which is really an anti-social fund, will hurt their dignity and could seriously compound any problems of depression. Depending on circumstances its discretionary loan nature and the provision for "advice on budget management" could drive women into the clutches of money lenders and loan sharks.

In the Commons debate last June it was this proposal for "advice on budget management" which I challenged most. This is an insult to the poor suggesting that they do not need an improvement in their income but advice on how to budget. There are 650 MP's in the Commons. I asked them what one of them could manage a budget better than those dependent on Social Security. I told them that the best managers of budgets in the country are the women who rear, feed and clothe their families on the pittance of supplementary benefit. Sadly it looks as though they are being asked to get better still.

It should not be lost on anyone either that the British governments higher education policy also threatens opportunities for women. The student grants scheme is being run down, ancillary social security benefits to students are being withdrawn, college funding is being subjected to a process of "rolling privatisation". This reversal of the Robbin's principle can only mean more limited access to higher education for women. As student finance moves towards privatisation under loans and increased parental dependency it is clear that women will have more difficulty finding sponsorship for third level education. There has been little enough debate about the trends

In higher education policy and the implications for women have hardly been looked at. I can assure you that we will keep it up-front in our efforts.

The higher education factor is important not least because of its relevance to job opportunities. The north has seen progress in recent years on the question of Equal Opportunities and job discrimination. Our economic difficulties, with their source in the recession, monetarism and violence, have frustrated many of the hopes we all had however. In many of the areas where we have good legislation we do not really have the economic activity to give it reality. There is still a large problem of residual discrimination in many areas, not least the financial institutions.

There is still the fact that many women have found work only in low-paid jobs. Their position will be made worse by the government's policy against the Wages Councils which offer them their only protection in many sectors where they have no facility of trade union organisation.

Women in work will also lose out on some of the pension changes in the present Social Security Bill. Again particularly those on low wages. It is clear that abolition of SERPS in favour of Private and Occupational Pension schemes will leave them worse off. It will be difficult enough for women in many jobs to even get such alternative pension cover never mind one with smaller benefit.

It has been inevitable that any assessment of the legal process in Northern Ireland has concentrated on the question of the reliability of evidence, the absence of juries, the use of super grasses etc. This has been to the detriment of other important issues. One of these is the law and its Processes on Rape. The SDLP is committed to the introduction of new laws on Rape.

We believe that the present treatment of rape only adds to the ordeal of women. Police handling of rape victims must be changed to allow for more sensitivity to the distress and trauma of women. At present a Rape victim is under a heavier obligation to provide evidence of her assault at the police report and investigation stage, than the victim of practically any other offence. There is of course throughout a Rape case the obnoxious involvement of reference to or questions about a victim's sexual habits. This combined with the anomalous determination of "consent" by courts has served

to make rape cases something of a trial for victims. The definition of rape must also be changed. Our conference policy calls on the law to recognise Rape within marriage and also to end the narrow definition of rape as actually proven intercourse.

It is clear that if the courts and legal process are meant to serve the needs of all, to protect society and provide recourse to justice that issues such as the treatment of rape must be addressed meaningfully.

There are of course many other issues facing women in the North. I have chosen to speak on those which I feel have been given too little attention. This is not to take away from the importance of the question of strip-searching. This practice is degrading and offensive. It causes distress and nervous anxiety and is an affront to any standards of decency. The political situation has imposed directly on many women whether they have been widowed through violence, lost their partner through imprisonment or desertion while they go on the run or lost children to paramilitaries or violent death.

I will not patronise you with comments about the strength and resilience women in the North have shown during the troubles. Nor will I make trite comments about this day as International Women's Day. I will simply give you an undertaking that the SDLP and I will continue and hopefully improve our work for better social legislation in the North and a proper recognition of and response to women's needs. It is not easy for us to succeed. Labour in the South have the coalition dilemma of government or opposition. That would be a luxury for us as we cannot really be either. We will try.