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23. Taking on the Dinosaurs (1997)

Liz Kelly interviews Monica McWilliams

Liz Kelly: *Let's begin with how the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition came into being.*

Monica McWilliams: It was around April of 1996. The government published a list of parties they had decided were going to stand in the elections for the peace talks and to a new body called The Forum. I and the women I know were furious when we saw this, because we had been engaged in a whole range of conferences with women's groups across Northern Ireland about increasing the participation of women in mainstream decision making. One of these was in response to the framework document published by the British and Irish Governments. They hadn't mentioned women once in the entire document! It wasn't that we weren't political animals, we have been extremely active in grassroots politics, community politics, trade union politics and the various professional and voluntary sectors. Yet here was this opportunity that was being denied to us, to have a role in the new negotiating machinery.

At the same time an organisation called the European Women's Platform had written to all the political parties asking them where they were putting women in their lists and whether they had given serious attention to the number of women that would be elected. The response to that was abysmal, with replies from only three small parties — the Communist Party, the Democratic Left, and the Workers Party. We figured that if we wrote to the government and demanded they change the legislation, then if they said no then we would publicly go to press on it, and if they said yes we would have to do something quickly. They responded by saying that they had taken on board our views and they had agreed to change it — and what was the name of the party!

We called meetings of over 200 groups, faxed every group we could think of. We called meetings in Belfast and other areas. We still had not made a decision whether to stand but we were informing people that there was now an opportunity to create a women's party.

There were different views at those meetings. Against it was the view that this wasn't the election for us because the issues were constitutional; if we did stand and didn't do well we would be doing a disservice to the whole idea of women going into politics. The view for was that this was a unique election because it

was about getting the small parties to the table. You only needed about 1% of the vote, approximately 10,000. If we stood 100 women and each of them went out to seek 100 votes, knowing that they didn't have to be elected themselves because the votes would be aggregated, every woman would be standing for someone else, she wasn't necessarily standing to be elected for herself. That was a very comfortable space to be in. Realising that we were going to form a coalition the other parties suddenly began to say that they were promoting women, they were doing this and that. So we had already met one of our objectives, which was to put pressure on the other parties.

Decisions were made at open meetings which were advertised in newspapers. We also advertised for candidates because we felt that just using the networks was not always the best way to do it. We wanted to be as public and as transparent about it as possible. It was fun but chaotic in that we just covered walls in huge sheets of paper and put up all the names of constituencies and went round the rooms and women put their names up and when they saw that other women were prepared to do it then others came up. It was like an evangelical meeting. Women saying, well if she can do it, I can do it. We had the youngest candidate standing ever in an election and we had disabled candidates. In every constituency we had at least three or four candidates standing.

We found many interesting things along the way. For instance in relation to disability the lack of access into the polling stations — the fact that you could only take a male or female partner according to marriage to the count with you, you couldn't take a female partner. There were lots of things like that which we managed to have changed when the election was over.

It was only six weeks from the start of the campaign to the day of the election. We had to get the media on board so we started working really hard with them. We ran lots of training sessions for all the local women because that was the part they were most terrified of, actually having to take on the media. We had to keep reassuring them — did they ever hear much better from the people who'd been elected over the last 25 years? We picked the suffragette colours, green white and purple, and our slogan was Women For Talks, Women In Talks. For our canvassing papers we had just the manifesto and the joke in the papers was that was the only 'man' we had about us. The press kept that line up, another one was that the closest we would get to the negotiating table would be to polish it!

When we got elected the journalists were ill-prepared. They had produced these graphics for the front of the main Belfast newspaper showing ten little men with black ties on sitting around the table. Someone informed them by the evening

edition that they'd better change it because we'd been elected; so they took the little black ties off the graphic in the last edition of the paper. I guess they felt they were paying us a compliment when they titled their piece 'The Hen Party Leaves The Nest In Style'. We picked the slogan 'Wave Goodbye to Dinosaurs' and produced these huge purple white and green posters with that spread across them and white T shirts with a large X saying 'eXpress yourself' and 'Vote Women's Coalition'.

Liz: *How did you decide which were the two women who were going to go into the talks?*

Monica: We decided at a public meeting that there should be a woman who would be catholic and active in the women's movement and there should be a woman from a working class protestant/loyalist area. The group decided that one of those women should be me. I didn't really want to stand at all but women were quite fearful of putting themselves forward. Also we didn't actually know what it was going to entail, whether the talks were going to last for a day and collapse or whether you were giving up a year or two years of your life. The other woman is Pearl Seger, a loyalist working class woman with a community activist background.

I got nominated as the leader of the Coalition. Even though we don't use the titles of leaders they had to fill in somebody's name on the electoral papers and they nominated mine. One of the things we have done is to try and get away from this notion of leader. When we went into the talks each of the parties had a room and alongside each of the party rooms there's a leader's room and we couldn't believe it. So I took snopake and snopaked out the word 'leader'. Of course somebody thought our door had been vandalised and reported it and I said no it was me who did it because we don't believe in these titles. To this day, everywhere we go, people have difficulty with that. They still can't accept that we're a collective, that there are two of us elected with equal rights not one of us as a leader and the other as a follower.

Liz: *Tell us a little bit about the experience of the talks.*

Monica: The beginning was incredible. I mean the first day was intense — it was a very historic occasion. The world's media were there and incredible crowds of people. We were walking into this room which had a negotiating table in it and we sat down, Pearl and I and the three women who were our negotiators sitting behind us. I looked around and we were the only women in the room. We had been confirmed in everything we had thought the whole way through because all the

other parties had said that of course they were going to be putting women in their negotiating teams, but when it came to the crunch they didn't. So we were the only two women at the negotiating table. That was something. For me it was historical. After all the work that women had done over the 25 years we had created a space for them to have their voices heard at the table.

It's been sexist and sectarian. We are the double other and we are confusing as the other because we are coming from different backgrounds — we are not them as they see it. So we have become a target of their abuse. They threaten us, stand and shout at us, they prevent us from having our emergency motions heard. Whenever I'm speaking I have to make sure that the chairman calls order because I can't hear myself talking. They even comment on what we're wearing, if we're not wearing skirts and are wearing trousers. We've invaded their space, space that they feel belonged to them. We frighten them. They say this is radical, because when we feel that something's wrong we go out and shame them. We blame them and we name them and they've never had this done to them before. So they accuse us of running to the media all the time, but since there's no sanction on their behaviour internally and since they're not prepared to restrain themselves inside the place we've decided that the only sanction we have is to publicly expose them and we will do that at every stage of the process. We've got an insult of the week notice board up at the inner offices and we just write down everything with the date. We're letting them know they are under surveillance.

Liz: *What do you think the future looks like?*

Monica: We'll be staying together for at least the next two years because the talks will go on for two years. We will stand in the local elections and that's where we could do well because it's proportional representation. We will be putting up candidates for the general election but know we won't do well because it's going to be a bitter election. But we will put up three candidates to continue to get across our message and highlight the lack of women in politics. Also to get across our policies on domestic violence, on equal pay, on the issues that we feel very strongly about and that no one has bothered to raise.

Liz: *Talk about how you've taken what's going on in the talks back out to women and how you've been building the coalition outside the talks.*

Monica: On the last Saturday of every month we hold a public open meeting which is actually a coalition meeting but we make it known that we welcome any woman who wishes to attend. Occasionally men have attended as journalists and

we ask them to declare what they are there for and when they've got their bits down we ask them to leave, or if there are women journalists we ask are women comfortable and they can either stay or go. We are so open that it could be a problem for us but so far we prefer to stay open. If there are problems we prefer to let other people see how we work them out. We rotate those meetings across Northern Ireland, so they are not always in Belfast. We try to ensure that there's disabled access, a creche and that every woman has transport to the meetings. Those are quite well attended, big meetings. In between we have team meetings and they are held in people's houses.

Then we have consultative conferences that we hold every three months which are big public open conferences that everyone is free to attend and everybody gets their lunch. One was in Belfast and one has been down in the middle of Northern Ireland in Dungannon. We have made a point of ensuring that they are not coalition member only meetings, that they are meetings for other women from outside of the coalition as well as from other parties. We also have a newsletter that we send to everybody who is a member as well as to anybody that's made contact with us and has written their name on a sheet of paper. Every week we do a mailing on something.

What we try to do as much as possible is to do outreach, to disseminate our decisions when they are taken to others who haven't been at the meetings, and to ensure that the meeting itself has as many opinions about what we're doing, so that no woman feels in a dangerous or vulnerable position when she leaves the meeting that she could be attacked afterwards for having taken a decision that other people would disagree with or that she feels she couldn't go back into her community and live with. Those are the kinds of reasons why we take the decisions we take.

Liz: *We both know that the women's movement is often fraught with conflict, but that we find it difficult to openly disagree with one another, and then continue working together. How have you managed to build this atmosphere that enables this?*

Monica: That's a good question. So far I think it is because women feel there's a space where they can really make their voices heard. But when you get a different viewpoint coming in there's a listening going on and maybe that's because we have worked out of such a terrible struggle and because it's been dangerous for us not to listen. Women know what happens when there's too much grandstanding and so there's a preparedness there that this thing has to work. Also I think it's facilitated by the process. I think if decisions were taken that people felt they hadn't

been involved in then maybe there would be an awful lot of ill feeling. It's also because there's such honesty. Some of it is so honest and so blunt that it goes right to the jugular but that's not a bad thing because it then means the person has said it and we've got to work out of that position towards a position in which that person may end up saying well I can agree with that but I couldn't have agreed with what we started out with. That's why we end up with compromise. Compromise sounds like a terrible bloody word, in Northern Ireland people are told not to use it because it's seen as such an extreme word, can you believe that. We try and use the word 'accommodation'. For us it's the most difficult thing to arrive at but we're determined when we get there that it's something that people actually do feel comfortable around.

Liz: *When we talked last year you mentioned opposition from women in other parties to the idea of the Women's Coalition. I get a sense that some of that has shifted?*

Monica: There was some antipathy towards us from the Republican women at first. They press released a protest without actually calling a meeting with us. We discovered afterwards that a couple of people whose names were on the press release hadn't even been asked to sign it and were furious. But all of that has gone and the antipathy has gone because they now realise that we have borne the brunt of sectarianism and in some senses have acknowledged the stand that we have had to take which has been a fairly tough stand. I think they were worried that we were only going to take a stand on women's issues and not stand on constitutional issues. We said from the very start how dare anybody be so patronising to think, first, that women's issues weren't constitutional issues and secondly that we wouldn't have a strong say on anything like police reform, prisoners, and the list of things like that. We said look we have policy statements on every one of these things and by the way when we say reform the police we say reform the criminal justice system of which the police is only one part, we want the whole criminal justice system to be reformed. We have produced papers to that effect. They obviously had not read any of our documents. Now that has changed a bit.

The other parties, the mainstream parties, had their noses put out of joint. The Unionist party was totally opposed to positive action and said that women would get there in their own right, (they've done such a good job that they have one woman out of 35 men). The SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party) argued that we were opportunistic. They began to change their views a bit but because an election has started they are actually going out saying don't vote for the Women's

Coalition, they are single issue and don't have a stand on the constitution. I've been on TV that much, people now know that we have stands on everything.

Liz: *It sounds like the women in the Coalition are fantastic!*

Monica: They are just wonderful. Every time you turn around somebody's got a press statement, a policy statement, a speech, they've got ready for you. There's a terrific team atmosphere in the place. The women who are quietly working in the background are the strategists who don't seek media attention, who people don't even know belong to the Coalition and yet have probably taken the most important roles. For some there is the difficulty that because the Coalition is seen as a political group they can't publicly let it be known that they belong: their jobs would be in jeopardy, or their centres wouldn't get any money, the women's centres in particular. Councillors have threatened to close down the centres if they find out that any single one of them has been involved with the Coalition. They can't do it publicly so they do it privately either through financial donations or by writing speeches or by giving us whatever support they can, and they've been brilliant.

Liz: *For me it's an example of just what women can do if they set their minds to it.*

Monica: Oh absolutely. We never thought that we would be where we are and it has made such a difference to politics here. People say they'll never behave like that again because we've exposed the culture and the TV keeps repeating the ritual humiliation of me and Pearl and people say look, that's working because if they are doing that to women what must they have been doing over the years to the political negotiations. We never stood for election simply to be humiliated but if that is an outcome of exposing 'men behaving badly' then so be it. The other thing that I think is beginning to change is that they now realise that we are serious players here and that every strategy that we've engaged in has been so effective that they are now becoming quite intimidated by us.

Yesterday for instance at the Talks after my speech Ian Paisley berated me for one hour, the guts of which was that he was going to ensure at the end of the day that his people would breed for Ulster, so that they could outbreed the likes of me and others. Last week we walked out in protest, we just picked up our books and walked out. We had been promised that our Emergency Motion would be heard, we'd asked for the suspension of one of the committees on the grounds of corruption and Paisley got to the chair and said 'if you dare let those women speak' and the Chair gave in. So they wouldn't let me speak, I had to get up three times

on a point of order and remind him that he wasn't sticking to the rules. When he refused to hear me Pearl and I picked up our stuff and walked out and went straight to the press and told them what we thought of what had happened.

Liz: *It is difficult to imagine doing something similar in England, Scotland and Wales without proportional representation, but do you think that as a political strategy it's a good thing for women to do?*

Monica: Absolutely and don't let anybody start putting you down, because it's separatist and it's single issue and nobody will be interested in you. It was really important. Our time was right, one of those times when there was a window of opportunity, we couldn't have forgiven ourselves if we had let it go by. We could have waited around and they would have solved the Irish question before they would have resolved any attempts to be more inclusive of women!

Liz: *Has the Coalition been a route for women to discover feminism?*

Monica: Some of the women would have had difficulty owning that label at the start but they are much more comfortable with it now. Working class women in Northern Ireland in particular would have found that a difficult label, and even middle class women. It does cross class, that antipathy that existed in more conservative society towards feminism. But they wouldn't have a difficulty with it now. There are women, but they would be small in number, who would still not be prepared to say I'm a feminist, but the vast majority of the women in the Coalition are there because they believe in feminism.