

## **How to elect more women – CAWP/WRDA event for International Women’s Day – Queen’s University, 9 March 2012**

### **Speech notes for Evelyn Collins, chief executive**

- The Commission welcomes the opportunity to input to this conference – a key event in this year’s International Women’s Day programme.
- Each year, International Women’s Day provides an opportunity to reflect on achievements and to celebrate women’s contribution to society. However, it also makes us focus on what more needs to be done to address the gaps, the persistent inequalities that still exist.
- I have commented before that one hundred years ago the issue of women in Parliament featured on the agenda of the very first International Women’s Day. I wonder if those who took part ever imagined that under-representation would still be an issue one hundred years on, but it is.
- That’s not to say that much hasn’t changed in the past number of years, but many of you will agree that the pace of change has perhaps been too slow in some areas. And none more so than in the area of politics and public life.
- We’ve had sex discrimination law in Britain and Northern Ireland since the mid 70s and we’ve had the legislation which means that political parties are able to take special measures to increase the number of women coming forward for selection and possible election since 2002.
- Ten years on, however, this permissive legislation has not made a significant difference in Northern Ireland, either to the overall balance in local government here or in the Assembly.
- I acknowledge that we have 2 out of 3 MEPs who are women and 4 out of 15 ministerial posts are held by women. But the 2011 elections saw only a marginal increase in the council elections and in the

number of MLAs. We have to question why progress continues to be so slow here and whether it's time to do something radically different.

- Our record in Northern Ireland compares somewhat unfavourably with the rest of the UK and the other devolved administrations – women make up only **19%** of our Assembly (20 out of 108 MLAs) compared with **35%** in the Scottish Assembly and **47% (tbc)** in the Welsh Assembly. (Note – when Margaret Ritchie resigns at end March and is replaced by Sean Rogers, there will only be 19 women MLAs)
- In local government, following the 2011 elections we saw a marginal increase in the number of women councillors but, at **23%**, we lag behind other regions of the UK (England, for example, has 31%).
- So what explains the difference?
- While it is clear that there is much good work being done by the parties here to encourage more women to come forward and participate in politics, we don't see evidence that the special measures allowed under the Sex Discrimination (Election of Parliamentary Candidates) Act 2002 are being exploited fully.
- This legislation was not introduced lightly – it recognized that decades of encouragement had not succeeded in increasing significantly the number of women coming forward and getting elected. The legislation was initially set to expire in 2015 but Harriet Harman announced that it was being extended to 2030 under the Equality Act 2010.
- This extension also applies to N Ireland so there is opportunity to take advantage. In the coming period, we would urge the parties to go beyond what they are already doing and use all the positive action measures allowed.
- Political parties are exempted from the normal provisions of sex discrimination law in relation to “arrangements they adopt for the purpose of reducing inequality in the number of women and men elected”. This gives wide scope for lawful positive action.

- Parties are allowed to take steps such as setting targets for women members in the party or targets for the number of women going forward for selection in local government and Assembly elections. Indeed, the law permits women-only short lists, although these don't seem to find favour with everyone.
- However, using the legislation is only one part of the picture. As with certain other areas of work, the culture of politics and public life here is not always welcoming to women or other minorities. There are well documented barriers to women's participation in politics which parties could do more to address.
- We would like to see parties explore these barriers with their own women members, and potential members, with a view to really listening and responding to them. It is still the case that women have to fit into the current structures and norms, rather than have them change or adapt to accommodate their way of working. If parties are genuinely interested in increasing women's representation, they may need to be prepared to do things differently.
- The sometimes adversarial nature of politics doesn't help and politics is not an occupation that is particularly family-friendly, for women or men. However, combining family and work is still seen as a 'women's problem', rather than a problem for society as a whole or for both sexes.
- It is interesting to speculate whether a more gender balanced Assembly would change the way government works or lead to any rebalancing of government priorities. But we can only assume that it would/might.
- It was very welcome to see proposals for a childcare strategy in the recent draft Programme for Government. But we may be a long way off seeing the benefit of any strategy.
- In the meantime, we continue to see a high level of complaints of discrimination at work reported to the Commission. Complaints and

enquiries about gender are only surpassed by complaints about disability.

- Discouragingly, the main issues complained about are still pregnancy/maternity and the problems of combining family and caring with career. Women suffer as a result of becoming parents; men much less so.
- In the past few weeks, the Commission has seen two notable tribunal cases on this issue, both of which were upheld – but women with children should not have to resort to tribunal in order to keep their job or to have a fair opportunity of getting a job they are well qualified to do.
- The PfG rightly prioritises creating and maintaining a vibrant economy. To achieve this requires the talent and effort of everyone in society and that includes women. We need women in the workforce and creating wealth, but also in political decision making.
- We know from other experience, for example, our fair employment legislation, that special measures can make a huge difference. We also know that it is easier to effect change from within.
- We would like to see parties and councils setting more challenging targets for improving their gender balance. There is very good work being done which is making a difference but the pace of change must be stepped up. We must also guard against the possibility that recent gains may be lost as a result of the review of public administration.
- If we want to have a thriving, successful economy and society, we should be aiming to have to have a balanced government which harnesses the talents of men and women. More women in government may help ensure that what are currently considered 'women's issues' become mainstream priorities.
- Although we have 20 women in the Assembly, there is still a lack of representation on some influential committees. For example, one scrutiny committee has no women members and a number have only one. They include the OFMdFM and DFP committees. This

effectively means no women's voice on the committees which scrutinize the Programme for Government and the budget.

- There is concern that women are disproportionately affected by the current economic downturn. But while women are not influencing government and economic policy on an equal basis, there is a danger that this will not get the attention it deserves.
- Few are arguing against gender balance in government. The arguments seem to be mainly about how we get there. Other regions have embraced the positive action permitted by the legislation – it's time Northern Ireland followed suit.