

**SPEECH BY**  
**JOHN HUME MP MEP**  
**LEADER SDLP**  
**TO THE CONFERENCE**  
**"WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE IN EUROPE"**  
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Equality and the opportunity for women to participate in all levels of society, the economy and politics can only be regarded as a fundamental human right. That has been obscured by the conflict of the past twenty five years and the centuries of division which preceded it. In the new climate, I hope that other equally fundamental issues, such as the position of women in society, will get the attention they deserve.

Our membership of the European Union is very important in this respect, as in so many others. The struggle for equal opportunities in these islands has been greatly enhanced by our membership of the European Union. Much of the equal opportunities legislation in these islands has been inspired by the necessity to conform to the European Treaties and legislation. It is therefore a setback to the cause of equal opportunities that the British government has opted out of the Social Chapter. Reversing the opt-out should be a prime objective of all those concerned with inequality.

While providing a legislative framework for equality is essential, it is not enough. We must also address the complex range of social and economic factors which create barriers to equality. Indirect discrimination must be targeted as much as the more overt form. We have to recognise that democracy as much as prosperity is best served by using all the talents at the disposal of society. Discrimination costs in economic, social and political terms.

The cause of equal opportunities is both right in principle, and beneficial in practice. In a statement issued on International Women's Day this year, the social democratic and labour parties of Europe, emphasised that economic crisis should not be used as an excuse to halt progress towards equal opportunities, but rather made it all the more necessary. As we pointed out: "It is precisely when times are hard that policy on women must be an integral component of economic, employment, environmental, family, financial, social and societal policy ..... The achievement of equal opportunities will be a source of enrichment for all citizens." The Socialist Group in the European Parliament has been in the forefront of the campaign for equal opportunities, and intend to continue to press for legislative and political change.

Turning to more specific policy issues, it is clear that the European Institutions are facing a heavy workload in the pursuit of equality. Equal opportunities is now one of the issues at the top of the European agenda. For a variety of issues such as the change in the composition of the workforce, transformations in the nature of work from agriculture and manufacturing to the service sector, the need to reform and preserve the European welfare state, the status of women in society has to be addressed. In addition, the Maastricht Treaty, by giving the European Parliament the power to approve or reject the appointment of the Commission, has allowed the elected representatives of Europe to oblige the Commission to put the issue of equality in the centre of its programme. President Santer himself chairs a Commission Task Force, in which all Commissioners can take part, whose task it is to oversee equal opportunities policies in the European Union.

The importance attached to the rights of women can also be seen in the Commission White Paper on Social Policy. Three issues in particular have been identified as priorities: finding a European-wide approach to the desegregation of the labour market; reconciling work and family responsibilities; and increasing the role of women in decision-making.

All three issues are presently under discussion within the institutions. As far as the desegregation of the labour market is concerned, the Commission is preparing to put forward a code of practice on equal pay, in order to supplement existing EU law, and to make it clear to employers and employees that discrimination is unacceptable. Men and women must be treated equally in terms of pay if we are to avoid the ghettoization of work into segregated labour markets.

Furthermore, Commissioner Flynn has also announced plans to provide new procedures and remedies for violations of Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome, which enshrines the principle of equal pay into the European law, and of the European Directives which derive from it. He also intends to bring forward new proposals on equal treatment in social security and occupational pension schemes to take account of the recent European Court of Justice case on retirement ages. The Commission also intends to report on measures taken in pursuit of positive action for women. This last report should provide an opportunity to survey what progress has been made, what needs to be done, and the future proposals which may need to be implemented.

Of course, equality cannot be reduced simply to the question of equal pay for equal work, however fundamental that principle is. Access to work in the first place is equally fundamental. That is why proposals to facilitate the ability to combine work with family responsibilities are so essential. In particular, the question of parental leave is now firmly on agenda. Despite the actions of the British government in blocking a proposed Directive last year, progress continues to be made in the rest of Europe. The Social Chapter of the Maastricht Treaty, from which we are unfortunately exempt, due to the British opt-out has been invoked to allow the other fourteen member states to find a collective solution. Hopefully, the British government will eventually opt in and we will benefit from the social dimension of the European Union.

The Maastricht Treaty envisages two possible methods for defining common European standards in the field of social policy - collective agreements between employers and unions, the so called Social Dialogue procedure, and conventional European legislation (the British government involvement). The Commission has decided to put the question of parental leave, and the reversal of the burden of proof in sex discrimination cases, into the Social Dialogue in the hope that unions and employers will come to an acceptable agreement. It is important to note that many of the issues which have been discussed today can also be pursued through union and employer channels, as well as through the normal European political process. In the absence of such agreement, the Commission retains the right to initiate legislation.

In the meantime, it is to be hoped that the Commission will soon take a decision on how to pursue the objective of ensuring equal rights for part-time and temporary workers, who are, mainly women (80% of part-time and temporary workers in the European Union are women).

The inappropriately named Directive on A - typical Work has been vetoed by the British government (with the more or less open support of the Irish government). But it is essential, if we are to halt the growing feminization of poverty, that part-time and temporary workers do benefit from equal treatment at work. The European Parliament will be watching closely to ensure that the issue is pursued vigorously, and of course, will continue to campaign against the British opt-out from the Social Chapter.

Given that poverty is increasingly a problem for women, it is regrettable that the fight against poverty at European level has stagnated. Unfortunately, the Poverty Programme has been blocked by the German government, for reasons which have little to do with the merits of the Programme. Once again, the European Parliament is striving to keep the issue on the agenda in the hope of persuading the Council of Ministers, to return to the previous practice of recognising the need for Europe to combat poverty collectively.

There is also a need to ensure that women play a more equitable role in decision making. While experience shows that it is no guarantee that the rights of women will be vindicated solely by placing women in positions of responsibility, I believe that obtaining a critical mass of women in positions of responsibility would be helpful. This is not just a question of elementary justice; such a change would help to make our political institutions more effective in pursuing equal opportunities.

Having said that, few of Europe's political institutions and parties have lived up to their ideals. As you have heard, the European Institutions have a long way to go to reconcile rhetoric with reality. Neither is the record in Northern Ireland that good. But I would say two things: I hope that the Conference today leads to positive action on equal opportunities in public life, and that it encourages us to push for an equal share of power and responsibility. No one will hand you equality on a plate, however well intentioned. Equality has to be won, not granted.

We are beginning to take this issue on board. As yet there is no legislation in the pipeline in Europe, but the Commission is beginning to take action. A Draft Recommendation on equality in decision-making is in preparation. A Recommendation is not binding, but it is the first step on the legislative ladder, raises awareness, and provides an impetus for further action.

Hopefully such concerns will be integrated into the Fourth Action Programme on Women which is presently in preparation. Commissioner Flynn has promised to give serious consideration to proposals which could be incorporated into the Programme, which he hopes will be approved by the end of the year. It would be certainly advisable to communicate your ideas to the Commissioner if you wish to take part in the consultation process.

In this respect, the new Special Initiative for Northern Ireland and the border counties provides a good opportunity to develop innovative projects. The Initiative has been approved by the Commission and by the Regional Affairs Committee of the Parliament. It seems it will be approved by the Parliament and the Council of Ministers in the next few weeks. The Initiative lays a lot of emphasis on the role of women in economy and society, as does the report on the Initiative which I have drawn up for the Parliament.

In particular, the Initiative is designed to increase women's participation in the labour force, and to involve women in programmes to further social inclusion and reconciliation. Given the intention of the Commission to be innovative and flexible in the management of the Initiative, I believe that there will be great opportunities to substantially improve the quality of life, and for a region to develop schemes which can blaze a trail for the rest of Europe.

One other recent development in Europe which has particular relevance for our region is the dawning awareness in the European Institutions of the problems faced by the spouses of the self-employed, and in, particular, the wives of farmers. Under the leadership of Simone Veil, the President of the Council of Social Affairs Ministers, the specific problems of women in rural society and agriculture are beginning to be recognised. The French Presidency has decided to start a debate on these problems, and is organising a European seminar in June, which will be the start of a process leading to new initiatives and programmes. I hope that our region will be able to make a serious contribution to that debate.

I hope I have said enough to show that the status of women is being taken seriously at European level. We may not make enough progress, or advance as quickly as we should, but there is no doubt that there is a large progressive movement in favour of equality. The degree of success that alliance can achieve depends partly on political will but even more so on the nature of the decision making process in Europe.

That is why the Inter-Governmental Conference of 1996, which will review the Maastricht Treaty, is so important. It may have a substantial effect on the ability to continue to progress towards full equality.

I supported the Maastricht Treaty in Westminster and Strasbourg, despite its evident flaws, precisely because it did extend the competence of the European Union and strengthened its powers. Even with the UK opt-out, the social dimension of policy-making has been enhanced. But that has not been to the liking of the more reactionary elements in European politics, hence the emergence of Euro-scepticism.

In 1996, we will have to fight off the attempts of the Euro-sceptics to undermine the social dimension of the EU. At the very least, we should be looking to defend the gains made by the Maastricht Treaty. Along with the other social democrat and labour parties in Europe, we will be looking for improvements. At the moment, our parties have just begun a process designed to bring about a common position on the changes we would like to see. Pauline Green, as Leader of the Socialist Group, is also extremely busy with the process of drawing up a common statement for the Socialist Group. In both processes, we will be concerned to develop proposals which will preserve and enhance European policy on social affairs, particularly as it relates to equality. Today's proceedings will contribute to the discussion between the European parties, and the concerns expressed here will be reflected in the European debate.

A number of ideas have been put forward for consideration in the Inter-Governmental Conference. For instance, the Party of European Socialists Women's Organisation has called for the establishment of an Equality Councils of Ministers, which would bring together in the Council of Ministers all the ministers responsible for equal opportunities and the rights of women in domestic governments. Similarly, there are proposals to extend the equality clauses of the Treaty of Rome to cover all forms of sex discrimination, not just those related to the labour market. There are also proposals to amend the decision-making procedures of the European Union to make it faster and easier to secure European legislation on equal opportunities and rights.

Over the next year or two, such issues will be at the forefront of debate on the future of Europe, and its relation to domestic politics. I hope that this conference will help to ensure that Northern Ireland will be in the mainstream of that debate, and that we will play our part in the creation of genuinely progressive and equal Europe.

I look forward, in the words of Simone Veil, to "a society which will no longer be one made by men for men, but one made by all of us, women and men, for all of us".