



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

Sport, Politics and Community Relations in Northern Ireland

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The Irish association has long been ahead of its time. For sixty years it has encouraged the people of Ireland and Northern Ireland to communicate. To celebrate what unites them, to respect what makes them different. Long before the term entered Northern Ireland political-speak the Irish Association was among the first cross border bodies !

It has, moreover, long recognised that politics can only replace violence and that divides can only be bridged when we set aside our narrow interests and value all traditions and aspirations alike. Now, sixty years on, these are I believe the foundations on which we will build a new Northern Ireland. But begs the question as to how ?

Good Friday 1998 promised a fresh start. It promised a lasting political settlement, unbreakable peace, a society in which there were, emphatically, no second class citizens. Turning that vision into reality has been a long and arduous and at times difficult process and we have had setbacks along the way.

On 11 February Peter Mandelson took the decision to suspend the Assembly and Executive. It was a step we had hoped and actively tried to avert. For the first time ever unionists, nationalists and republicans had joined together in government. Whatever their background or beliefs, they had come together with a single purpose: to apply local minds to local problems for the good of all the people of Northern Ireland. And even though people might not always agree with the specific decisions, I believe they saw the fact that these were decisions taken by locally elected politicians as progress.

But, if we had not temporarily suspended the government, the Agreement itself was at risk of uncontrolled collapse. Given the choice between suspension and collapse, there was no real choice at all. After the palpable euphoria of devolution, I can understand why there is in many quarters great sadness at the suspension of the institutions.

I know why republicans and nationalists are angry. Of course to some people, decommissioning seems like a side-show to the main event - the agreed constitutional change. If guns are silent, why press for more ? But we need to be clear: we cannot build a democratic government on the back of paramilitary organisations.

The ostensible cause of suspension was the single issue of decommissioning. But the difficulties ran deep and cut to the heart of what this process is about: and that is building the trust of all parts of the community that this is the best way forward.



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The cornerstone of the Good Friday Agreement is cross-community support. And it cannot in all honesty survive unless both communities can have confidence that their best interests are protected and both communities have confidence in each other.

At the conclusion of George Mitchell's review of the peace process in November the Ulster Unionist Party took a gamble and agreed to enter government with Sinn Fein before any weapons had been handed over. They made it clear that they could only sustain their position until January in the absence of progress on decommissioning.

This was a courageous and difficult move for David Trimble. Many within his party balked at what they saw as a leap in the dark. But David, nevertheless, secured their support for setting up the Executive.

But by the end of January there had been no concrete progress towards decommissioning and confidence in the institutions was ebbing away. Our efforts, and those of the Irish Government, to avert suspension did bring about encouraging signs, including the most positive signal yet from the IRA that decommissioning could occur. But sadly, in the end, this was too little and too late to sustain the institutions. That briefly is how we arrived at this point.

But now we must move on. We must draw a line under the futile and corrosive blame and counter-blame culture that has started to emerge in recent weeks. We must set ourselves once again to the task of rebuilding trust in the Good Friday Agreement and restoring self-government as soon as we possibly can.

Now I know that there are some who would argue that the GFA contained the seeds of its own destruction by not addressing all of the contradictions that this sort of process inevitably carries with it. Well I know that I am a late entrant as it were, having only arrived on the scene last July. But one thing is clear to me: if we started the whole peace process off again and sent everybody concerned away with a blank sheet of paper to design a new agreement, we would end up with something so like the GFA as to make the exercise futile.

All political life involves compromise and compromise inevitably has to sit alongside unaddressed contradictions. In a perfect and rational universe compromise would be unnecessary; but thank God we do not live on such a planet. So we must send the clearest possible signal to the people of Northern Ireland: the Good Friday Agreement is still in business.

And all of us who supported it have a responsibility - unionist, nationalist and republican as well as the two Governments - to implement it in full.



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Now without I hope succumbing to cynicism, I am a realist. Frankly as a government we cannot rebuild confidence on our own. Nor can we ask unionists to go back into government without some clarification of the issue of arms. We still welcome the contribution of the Sinn Fein leadership to this process. We welcome the silence of IRA guns and their statement that they pose no threat to the peace process. But we need to know more about their intentions. No-one is talking about surrender, no-one is talking about defeat. We do not - would not - seek to impose unreasonable deadlines.

But we do need to see progress, progress from all paramilitary groups, not just the IRA, within an acceptable timeframe, as envisaged by the Good Friday Agreement. We know that moving forwards will demand yet more courage and patience from Northern Ireland's political leaders. As George Mitchell warned as he concluded his review in November, no-one gets everything they want.

But Northern Ireland is not the place it was even two years ago. Despite the setbacks, in every town and village we can see people finally starting the process of leaving the past behind them, a society finally maybe at times hesitantly getting back to normal.

And we have to be honest, there is still conflict in Northern Ireland. No level of violence - however low - is acceptable. But there has been enormous improvements in the security situation and everyone's daily lives. But the transformed security situation means that there are fewer troops on the ground than at any time since the 1970's and army patrolling has been reduced by two-thirds.

Since 1996, 26 army bases and installations have been closed or demolished. Security barriers in many towns and city centres in Northern Ireland are left open and will eventually be removed. When I came back to Northern Ireland in 1996, a decade or so after my previous visit, the difference was obvious, and when I came over as a Minister last Summer it was even more so. And more is possible in the future. We want to return to a normal level of policing, without the extra security needed for so many years. Not as a political bargaining chip but simply as and when the level of threat reduces.

And while the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are on hold, that Agreement has nonetheless brought about permanent changes in our civic society. The Good Friday Agreement gave nationalists and unionists an equal stake in the Government of Northern Ireland and an equal status in the eyes of that Government. And it will do so again.



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It has created a new Human Rights Commission and an Equality Commission giving Northern Ireland a rights culture which I believe other countries around the world will look to as a model of excellence.

It has created a whole new architecture of institutional links throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland, including a framework for meaningful, practical co-operation between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

And we have enjoyed a brief glimpse of what Northern Ireland can be. Unemployment has fallen. Investors' confidence has grown. And this climate fosters ambitious new projects, like the design for the Belfast/Dublin Road.

We have seen young people, who were born and have grown up here during the last troubled 30 years, finally believing there could be a peaceful and prosperous future for their home country. In their hearts and minds I believe that the people have left Northern Ireland's dark days behind them. So, for their sake, we must not let this process fall into the hands of the wreckers, whose politics is obstruction and refusal and whose reflex is always to say 'no'.

Of course, there are no easy fixes, no simple solutions. We want this suspension to be brief. Our urgent priority, and that of the parties, is to restore the institutions as quickly as possible. I believe that with patience and good will we can reactivate Northern Ireland's government and put it on a firmer footing than it was before suspensions. And I sincerely believe that when we restore self-government to Northern Ireland, when we can truly say that we have permanent peace, organisations like the Irish Association will be entitled to claim some part in that success.

In the darkest years of the troubles the work of many people have shown to people in Northern Ireland that they did not suffer in isolation. That both here and further afield, people were - quietly - sowing the seeds of change. The greatest tribute that we can pay to those efforts is to turn that hope into reality and unlock the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement. It is the best and let me be brutally honest, it is the only hope we have for a better future in Northern Ireland.

I know full well that in the coming weeks the voices that shout 'No' the loudest will depress and debilitate the spirit of progress that we have all been trying to foster. I know too that there will be some republicans and some loyalists who will want to ease back into the comfortable monochrome certainty of conflict and violence. But in the end they represent the voice only of reaction.



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Those of us who want to bring about progress and change have a duty. It is our duty, on the one hand, to make friends out of our enemies; but it is a duty also to challenge violence and conflict from wherever it comes, by rejecting puerile slogans as a substitute for properly developed arguments and democratic principles.

The opportunities are still alive and we must take them, not in a spirit of good intentions alone - welcome though they are - but with clear-eyed and honest dialogue.