

## **Irish Association AGM for 2022 Dublin 28-01-2023**

### **President's Report**

2022 saw an almost full return to in-person meetings and events for the Irish Association, a development which was much appreciated by members, supporters and those organisations we collaborated with in the delivery of our programme of work.

That said, there was a slow start to 2022: the arrival of Omicron in late 2021 changed the pace of our work and indeed last year's AGM took place online.

The Irish Association continued to work alongside Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation which draws together a range of organisations from both jurisdictions on the island. The Group – convened by Dr Anthony Soares – and the Centre for Cross Border Studies in Armagh - is a prime contact point for consultation between cross-border civil society and regional, national and EU bodies on matters relevant to cooperation between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and between the island of Ireland and Great Britain.

There are eight headline events I'd like to draw your attention to in this review of 2022.

1.

In March the Irish Association delivered the last event in the three Heritage Lottery Funded events which had a wider banner title of *A Century of All-island*

*Relations.* This discussion was held at University College Cork and along, with our some work on our archives and a substantial deposition of papers in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, marked the end of that project of work.

2.

In May our Spring lunch in Wynn's Hotel, Dublin was addressed by Fine Gael Senator Emer Currie. She offered a comprehensive assessment of N/S relations from her perspective, borne as she noted herself on the day "from so much personal experience."

3.

At relatively late notice our annual conference planned for June and examining the role played by the media, North and South, in helping citizens understand the changing nature of relations on the island had to be postponed. The late change in the availability of the then scheduled keynote speaker necessitated a deferral until October and also a change of location in Belfast to a more central and accessible venue.

4.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> July we had a full house, a very engaged audience and plenty of questions for Andy Pollack who spoke at an Irish Association sponsored event within the wider context of the John Hewitt International Summer School. Andy's chosen topic "the people of the south are not ready for reunification" while punchy and perhaps provocative nonetheless set the tone for a more reflective and considered conversation on future relations across the island. There was comprehensive online reporting of this event and, I believe, a

heightened awareness of the Irish Association which is, of course, one of the strategic reasons for the collaboration.

5.

In September at our Autumn lunch in Dublin the former Ambassador and senior DFA official David Dongahue spoke on new book chronicling the lead-up to – and the stories within – the negotiations which led to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. His contention that the fundamental elements of the three stranded approach to improved relations on the island was much discussed in a Q + A session.

6.

On 13<sup>th</sup> October the Association brought back our New Voices strand which sees newly elected politicians from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland reflect on common challenges and experiences. The NI Assembly election of May 2022 allowed us to involve some new faces from that body and we are grateful to first time MLAs Philip Brett from the DUP and Patricia O'Lynn from the Alliance Party for participating alongside Mairead O'Farrell – SF TD for Galway West and James O'Connor FF Cork East.

7.

On 18<sup>th</sup> Oct we held our annual conference in the Clayton Hotel in Belfast on the role of the media with the Irish Times columnist Roisin Ingle delivering a very personal account of a changed and changing Northern Ireland and the extent to which all media – print, broadcast and increasingly social – has been able to reflect on this change. The conference was chaired by BBC NI's former political editor Mark Devenport who guided two panel discussions through

what one contributor memorably called “the different psychic landscapes” inhabited across the island and the part played by media in helping audiences become aware of these different priorities and ways of thinking. We have been working on preparing a summary of the conference for publication and hope to have an update on that soon.

8.

Our final in-person event was held in early December also in Belfast when the artist and portrait painter Colin Davidson spoke thoughtfully and very personally about his work and especially his collection *Silent Voices* in which he painted a number of victims and survivors of the Troubles. He reflected on meeting and painting the late Queen Elizabeth as well as her abiding interest in so many areas of life in Northern Ireland and the Republic.

I remain grateful to my fellow Council members for their generous service to the Irish Association in particular Vice President Ruth Taillon, Hon Treasure Phil Killeen and our long serving Hon Secretary Dermot O’Doherty. A number of members have expressed interest in serving on the Council and along with Prof Brian Walker as new President, as well as the possibility of co-options I’m confident that the Association will continue it’s work in the year ahead.