

## **President's address to AGM of the Irish Association, 27 January 2024.**

Welcome to the AGM of the Irish Association. I am honored to have taken over the position as president from Stephen. We are grateful for his leadership. I have to mention the death of two leading members of our Association, Brian Garrett and Stephen MacWhite. Brian was a leading Belfast solicitor, who played an important role in labour politics in Northern Ireland. He was president of our Association, 1986-8. Stephen worked for the Department of Foreign Affairs. He came from a family of distinguished diplomats, including a grandfather who had served in the League of Nations.

I can report an eventful year. On 28 March 2023 we held a well-attended symposium in the Royal Irish Academy. It was on the subject-‘Exploring Britishness and Irishness: a new look at identities in Ireland, North and South’. It was our last event to receive financial support from the Reconciliation Fund of the Department of Foreign Affairs. Speakers were Professor Pete Shirlow from the University of Liverpool, Professor John Coakley from University College Dublin and Dr Etain Tannam from Trinity College Dublin.

On 27 May we ran a lunch for members at Wynn's Hotel in Dublin. After the meal we listened to a fascinating talk by Rev. Chris Hudson. Chris is a former trade unionist, a key member of the Dublin/ Belfast Peace Train in the 1990s and now a non-subscribing presbyterian minister in Belfast.

On 23 July I attended the annual conference of the John Hewitt Summer School in Armagh. We sponsored an event which I chaired. A paper was given by leading trade unionist Owen Reidy entitled ‘Why Northern Ireland would benefit from proper social dialogue’.

On 18 September I attended in Dublin the launch by the Economic and Social Research Institute of a report on student mobility in Ireland. This highlighted the fact that compared to some decades ago there is now very little movement of students coming from Northern Ireland to study at southern universities. This is due to a number of factors such as the unfair equivalence of northern A levels and southern leaving certificates, and the difference between when results are given in the north and the south. Subsequently I wrote to the *Irish Times* to deplore this lack of mobility. I am glad to be able to report that new arrangements will soon be in place to make southern universities more open to northern students.

On 25 October I went to a Shared Island Dialogue Event in the Abbey Theatre. This was on the subject of 'Accommodating national identities'. The event was first addressed by Micheál Martin and then by an interesting, wide range of speakers.

On 22 November the Association held a very well-attended conference in the Ulster Reform Club in Belfast. The subject was 'The decade of centenaries-an appraisal and the lessons learned'. We had an impressive list of speakers. First we heard from the heads of the northern and southern of the government appointed bodies established to oversee these events, Lord Paul Bew and Professor Maurice Manning. Secondly, we were addressed by two individuals who had a responsibility for giving funding for many of these events, Dr Paul Mullan and Fearghal O'Coighligh. Thirdly, we heard from two leading historians who have been involved in some of these commemorations, Carol Walker and Dr Margaret Ward.

Finally, on 12 December we held our Christmas event in the Ulster Reform Club in Belfast. We were addressed by the renowned archivist, Dr Catriona

Crowe. She spoke on the subject, 'Dramatic national conversations: how theatre has dealt with the Anglo-Irish Treaty Debates and the Good Friday Agreement'.

During the year council considered plans for the future. Much attention was devoted to a proposed project to look at north-south co-operation, especially as it related to Strand Two of the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement, an idea raised first by Ruth Taillon. In the summer we applied to the Reconciliation Fund of the Department of the Foreign Affairs for funding for this project but were unsuccessful.

We revised the proposal and submitted it to the Shared Island Civic Society Fund. Its purpose is to examine north/south cross border co-operation since 1998 , looking at the north-south ministerial council and the 6 implementation bodies as well as those engaged in 6 other areas of co-operation. We propose to run 4 sessions, the first looking at the North-South Ministerial Council and then areas of economic, social and cultural matters. We await a verdict on our proposal.

Finally, I want to thank members of the council for their invaluable work on behalf of the Association, involving a considerable number of council and committee meetings. Especially, I would like to pay tribute to Dermot O'Doherty who has now stepped down from his role as secretary, after serving for some 11 years. Gladly, he is now vice-president and acting treasurer. I also wish to thank former treasurer Phil Killeen and former vice -president Ruth Taillon for their contributions. I want to welcome Conor O'Malley as our new secretary. A special word of thanks must go to our administrator Eimear Donnelly for all her work during the year.

**Professor Emeritus Brian M. Walker, President of the Irish Association**

