

The Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations

‘A Vision for North-South co-operation? Strand 2 – a generation on’

Report from first symposium, ‘The successes and challenges of North-South co-operation-the NSMC at 25’

Queen’s University Belfast, 9 Sept.2014

Report Introduction:

- **Context and Purpose:**

The inaugural session of The Irish Association for Cultural, Economic, and Social Relations' new conference series focused on Strand II of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA), exploring the theme: “*A Vision for the Future of North-South Cooperation? Strand 2 – A Generation On.*” The session convened a diverse group of policymakers, academics and civil society representatives to reflect on past achievements in North-South co-operation , while envisioning the future trajectory in the context of new political realities, including Brexit..This event addresses in particular the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), established to foster collaboration between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in areas of mutual interest. This cooperation, crucial to the peace process, has been instrumental in addressing shared social, economic, and environmental challenges.

- **Structure of the Report:**

The report will follow the flow of the seminar and include the following sections:

1. Introduction: Overview of the seminar's significance, marking the 25th anniversary of the NSMC, and its role in North-South cooperation under Strand II of the Good Friday Agreement.
2. Opening Session: Summary of the welcome remarks and the keynote discussion with Bertie Ahern and Lord Empey on the historical context of North-South relations.
3. NSMC at 25: Insights from the NSMC Joint Secretaries on the council’s achievements and challenges, including the impact of Brexit.
4. Panel One: Analysis of practical experiences from key practitioners in North-South cooperation from Tim O’Connor, Dr. Andrew McCormick, and Pamela Arthurs.
5. Panel Two: A forward-looking discussion on the future of North-South cooperation, featuring perspectives from Dr. Katy Hayward, Dr. Etain Tannam, Mark Hennessy, and Newton Emerson.
6. Conclusion and Political Themes: Summary of key insights and policy themes emanating from speakers relating to North-South cooperation and the future of the GFA.

1. Opening Session (500 words)

1.1 Welcome Remarks

- **Speaker:** Prof. Brian M. Walker, President, The Irish Association

In his welcome remarks, Prof. Brian M. Walker, President of The Irish Association, warmly greeted attendees and expressed his delight in hosting the first of four seminars focused on the record of cross-border cooperation since 1998. He outlined the significance of today's seminar. He asked "How well has North-South cooperation been working over the past 25 years? How well is it working today? What can we hope for in the future?"

1.2 Keynote Discussion: Negotiating North-South Relations

- **Speakers:**
 - **Bertie Ahern** (Taoiseach, 1997–2008)
 - **Lord Empey** (UUP Negotiator, 1998; UUP Leader, 2005–2010)
- **Chair:** Prof. Brian M. Walker, President, The Irish Association
- **Summary of Key Points:**
 1. Lord Empey:

In his keynote speech, **Lord Empey** provided an in-depth reflection on Strand II of the GFA, offering both historical insights and a critical analysis of its current status. He began by noting that while political insiders may be familiar with terms – like 'Strand II' – for others, these terms may require clarification. Empey set out to explain the origins and significance of the three strands that underpinned the GFA, each addressing different relationships vital to governance in Northern Ireland. Empey traced the concept of the strands back to the 1960s, emphasising that long before the peace process formally began, there was recognition of three key relationships that needed resolution:

1. **Internal relations within Northern Ireland (Strand I),**
2. **Relations on the island of Ireland (Strand II),**
3. **Relations between Ireland and Britain (Strand III).**

Focusing on Strand II, which governs North-South cooperation, Empey explained how it arose from the understanding that Northern Ireland's population is divided between those who aspire to an all-Ireland republic and those who want to remain part of the United Kingdom. Strand II, through the **NSMC**, was designed to formalise and structure cross-border cooperation across a range of areas, including agriculture, education, and health, and to create a number of north-south **implementation bodies**.

Empey emphasised the importance of the **legal foundation** of these agreements, noting that unlike many other peace processes globally, the GFA was put on a legislative basis, with a formal, legally-binding process involving elected negotiators. This legislative underpinning distinguished the Northern Ireland peace process and ensured that it was not merely ad hoc negotiations but a robust, structured process and was a key component of the overall process.

A key part of his speech detailed the **complex negotiations** around establishing the NSMC and the implementation bodies. He shared how early drafts of the agreement were unacceptable to the unionist community, as they proposed dozens of implementation bodies with full executive powers over various sectors. This would have effectively transferred significant governance powers from both the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Dáil to unelected implementation bodies. Empey described this proposal as "the last straw" for unionists, bringing negotiations to an impasse. The situation was only resolved when then-Taoiseach **Bertie Ahern** intervened, following the death of his mother, to scale back these proposals, thus saving the process.

Moving on to the present day, Empey reflected on the **challenges** faced by the NSMC, particularly the interruptions caused by the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly over the years, which has prevented the NSMC from functioning for extended periods. Despite this, he noted that since its inception, there has been no constitutional conflict within the bodies themselves, which he attributed to proper guidance and direction.

However, Empey argued that it is now time for a **review** of these North-South bodies. He suggested that the focus of cooperation might need to be adjusted, especially in light of **Brexit**, which has created significant challenges for North-South relations. He criticised the failure to fully utilise the North-South framework to address some of the friction caused by Brexit and suggested that the creation of new bodies or modification of existing ones could help manage these issues. Empey saw potential for the North-South institutions to play a role in smoothing relations between the UK and the EU, particularly in areas affected by Brexit.

In conclusion, Empey reiterated that the strands of the GFA were designed to address the various relationships within Northern Ireland and between Northern Ireland and its neighbours. He stressed the importance of ensuring that the institutions established under the agreement function effectively and adapt to the challenges of the present day, particularly post-Brexit. His final thought was that **the best way forward is to ensure that the institutions work** and continue to provide a foundation for peace and cooperation.

2. Bertie Ahern:

In his speech, **Bertie Ahern** expressed gratitude to both Lord Empey and the Irish Association and highlighted how timely it is to reflect on the role of the **North-South bodies**, especially in light of the 25th anniversary of the **GFA**. He echoed Empey's call for a review of the North-South institutions, noting that there has only been one formal review in 2003 despite the critical role these bodies play in island-wide cooperation.

Ahern acknowledged the significant **endorsement of the GFA by the people** of Ireland, which not only rejected violence but also paved the way for the establishment of new institutions. These institutions, particularly the **NSMC** and its implementation bodies, have placed cooperation at the heart of the future for both the North and the Republic. He emphasised

that the agreement was built around balancing the delicate issues of **constitutional status and identity**, promoting a collaborative and practical approach to policymaking.

Ahern shared a few **historical insights**, recounting how the document that established the north-south implementation bodies and areas of cooperation was agreed upon just before the final negotiations of the GFA. He recalled that, although controversial for some parties, these arrangements were essential in fostering cooperation on key issues such as agriculture, education, and transport. Ahern noted that the creation of these institutions was integral to changing **Articles 2 and 3** of the Irish Constitution, a crucial step in moving the peace process forward.

Reflecting on the enduring success of the bodies, Ahern paid tribute to key figures like **John Hume**, who envisioned cooperation between the North and South as essential for progress. Ahern noted how the institutions of the agreement, initially seen as ambitious aspirations, have now become a reality and are delivering crucial services across the island. These bodies have been quietly carrying out significant work, from promoting safe food to managing waterways, which has enhanced everyday life in Ireland.

Ahern praised the **Shared Island Initiative**, highlighting its role in promoting cooperation across a wide range of sectors. He remarked on the positive impact this initiative has had in uniting communities from different walks of life and its potential to create even more opportunities for collaboration in the future. The initiative, he suggested, embodies the spirit of **Strand II** by fostering practical cooperation based on mutual respect.

Looking ahead, Ahern expressed his belief in expanding North-South cooperation in new areas, even if some initiatives don't require formal implementation bodies. He stressed that there are numerous fields, such as trade and workforce development, where collaboration simply makes economic sense. He suggested that both the North and the Republic of Ireland could benefit from working together on areas that currently lack a "center of excellence," arguing that joint efforts would be more effective than trying to establish separate initiatives.

In addressing the **persistent challenges** to the NSMC, particularly the disruptions caused by the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Ahern called for the “**full and faithful implementation**” of the GFA to safeguard against such interruptions. He concluded by emphasising that North-South cooperation is painstaking but vital work, and that it plays a crucial role in maintaining and strengthening relationships across the island and between Ireland and Britain.

Ahern concluded with a plea to reduce the **bureaucratic paranoia** – specifically as a result of political sensitivity pertaining to language relating to North/South cooperation – surrounding the drafting of official documents, which he felt has become unnecessarily meticulous, detracting from the important work being done. He called for a more flexible and “grown-up approach,” suggesting that the time for such rigid checks has passed.

- **Thematic Discussion:**

Theme I: A key theme emerging from the speeches of **Lord Empey** and **Bertie Ahern** is their differing perspectives on how to approach North-South cooperation within the framework of the GFA. **Lord Empey stresses the importance of maintaining the formal structures** and agreements negotiated in the GFA, particularly the NSMC and the implementation bodies. He underscores the legal and institutional framework as crucial for ensuring stability and cooperation, cautioning against any moves that might dilute the formal governance mechanisms. In contrast, **Bertie Ahern adopts a more forward-looking and flexible stance**, suggesting that cooperation can and should extend beyond the formal structures of the GFA. He sees room for informal cooperation to develop, particularly in areas like trade and community engagement, without the need for strict legislative frameworks.

2. The Challenges of North-South Cooperation – The NSMC at 25

2.1 Presentation by NSMC Joint Secretaries

- **Speakers:**
 - **Richard Hill** (North)
 - **Hilary Reilly** (South)
- **Chair:** Prof. Brian M. Walker, President, The Irish Association
- **Summary of Presentation:**
 1. Richard Hill:

In his speech, **Richard Hill** emphasises the **practical governance** and **operational structure** of the NSMC, providing a detailed look at how the cooperation framework functions across the island of Ireland. A key theme in Hill's address is the **impact of formalised North-South cooperation** on the daily lives of people in both Northern Ireland and the Republic. He highlights the positive outcomes of this cooperation, particularly in sectors like **health, agriculture, and tourism**, noting that such cooperation has had life-saving impacts.

The North South Ministerial Council focuses on **12 defined areas of cooperation**.¹ In 6 of the areas, the cooperation is taken forward via lead policy departments working together. These are the areas of Agriculture, Education, Environment, Health, Transport and Tourism. In the other 6 areas, cooperation is delivered through North South Implementation Bodies.

Hill's speech emphasises the **importance of transparency** and the **systematic functioning** of the NSMC. He explains the council's mechanics – plenary meetings, sector-specific discussions, and institutional meetings – demonstrating how collaboration between ministers

from both jurisdictions is structured and institutionalised. This formal framework allows for mutual decision-making and progress on key policy areas.

Moreover, Hill underscores the **persistence of cooperation** despite past political disruptions. The fact that nearly 350 ministerial meetings have taken place since the council's inception showcases the commitment of both governments to maintaining North-South relations. Hill's role as joint secretary, alongside Hilary, serves to smooth out differences between the two jurisdictions, facilitating communication and problem-solving at the ministerial and civil servant levels. Ultimately, his remarks reflect a **steady, procedural approach** to maintaining and advancing cross-border cooperation.²

2. Hilary Reilly:

In her speech, Hilary Reilly reflects on the significant achievements of the NSMC over the past 25 years, providing a **high-level overview of its current initiatives**. Focusing on various sectors, she highlights the close cooperation between both jurisdictions, starting with **agriculture**. She underscores how collaboration has maintained Ireland's foot-and-mouth-free status and **secured geographical indication status for Irish grass-fed beef**, placing it alongside products like Parma ham, which is a significant achievement for farmers across both jurisdictions.

In education, she praises the **Middletown Centre for Autism**, established in 2007, as a model of North-South cooperation. This centre provides vital support to parents and educators working with children on the autism spectrum. Reilly also mentions ongoing efforts to address educational underachievement through a pilot cooperation program that targets disadvantaged areas.

Health cooperation is marked by success stories like the **Altnagelvin radiotherapy centre**, which serves patients from both the North and the South. This development allows Donegal patients access to life-saving treatment locally, rather than needing to travel to Galway or Dublin. She also highlights the **close collaboration during the COVID-19** pandemic, underscoring health as a dynamic area of North-South cooperation. Reilly closes by mentioning key North-South implementation bodies, such as **Waterways Ireland and InterTrade Ireland**, which have boosted cross-border trade and infrastructure. She also references the Irish government's Shared Island Initiative, aimed at harnessing the GFA's potential for deeper cooperation.³

• **Thematic Discussion:**

Theme I: Question Segment – Dr Margaret O'Callaghan, Queen's University, asked – “is there a mechanism for placing items potentially on the agenda for one of the implementation policies?” The example they give is the position of Lough Neagh as the largest water public on the island and its condition at present. This, they conjecture, should be made relevant to one or more of the implementation bodies under the agreement.

Richard Hill responds, stating, that it was included as a core element of the last NSMC plenary meeting, and actually, the Lough Neagh catchment crosses over both jurisdictions (roughly 10% is in the south of the island). He goes on to say that “it is very topical” and is particularly mentioned by the Executive Ministers in their draft program for government, which is now out for consultation. Collaboration between the two jurisdictions could remedy issues such as this. “The council is a Ministerial council, our agendas are set by our Ministers, our work program defines the areas that we talk about – water quality for example is an area of particular focus at the minute.”

Richard Hill’s response highlights the **flexibility of the NSMC’s agenda-setting process**, while also stressing the **ministerial-driven nature** of the council’s work. It also shows how North-South cooperation is not just policy-driven but also responsive to urgent, real-world problems affecting both jurisdictions.

3. Panel One: North-South Co-operation – A View from the Practitioners

3.1 Speakers:

- **Tim O’Connor** (First Joint Secretary, South, NSMC)
- **Dr. Andrew McCormick** (Former Permanent Secretary, Dept of Health, Northern Ireland)
- **Pamela Arthurs** (Chief Executive, East Border Region)
- **Chair:** Dr. Anthony Soares, Director, Centre for Cross Border Studies
- **Key Discussion Points:**

1. Tim O’Connor:

Tim O’Connor’s speech provides a unique reflection on his extensive experience in the Irish Civil Service and his role in shaping the GFA. O’Connor emphasises the distance travelled since the tense early negotiations of the GFA, describing how North-South cooperation, once considered “radioactive,” has evolved into a constructive and non-controversial area of collaboration. He recalls how Bertie Ahern’s bold act of faith in cross-border negotiation marked a turning point. Moreover, he highlights the practical and symbolic importance of creating formal institutions, with the NSMC as a significant structure facilitating cross-border cooperation. His tenure in Armagh as the first joint secretary was particularly significant, overseeing 65 NSMC meetings before political tensions temporarily halted progress in 2002.

O’Connor distilled his experiences into seven key lessons, offering important insights for future peacebuilding and cross-border collaboration:

1. **Importance of Political Context and Legitimacy:** Without the necessary political backing and legitimacy, even the most logical initiatives will fail.
2. **Importance of Good Architecture:** As David Trimble said, success came because the "architecture" of the GFA, including North-South cooperation, was well designed.

3. **Role of Institutions:** Institutions like the NSMC are crucial frameworks that operate even when political tensions arise.
4. **Building Trust:** Trust eliminates gamesmanship, and strong relationships are key to effective cooperation.
5. **No Surprises:** As joint secretary, O'Connor emphasised the destabilising impact of surprises in delicate negotiations, using the “Mercedes summit” as an example.
6. **Value of Complexity:** In peacebuilding, acknowledging complexity is vital to creating space for negotiation and resolution.
7. **Implementation as Negotiation:** Establishing structures around implementation is a form of continued negotiation, essential for achieving long-term success.

These lessons emphasise the significance of structured frameworks, trust, and adaptability in maintaining and advancing cross-border cooperation, particularly in the Northern Ireland context.

2. Dr. Andrew McCormick:

Andrew McCormick’s speech provided a **reflective analysis** of his deep involvement in the design and negotiation of the institutional framework underpinning North-South cooperation within the GFA. His role in the early 1990s involved developing the mechanics of how decisions in Strand 2 (North-South cooperation) would function, particularly the concept of “**consensus**” and the management of political anxieties around **power-sharing between nationalist and unionist ministers**. McCormick noted how the ambition behind Strand 2 extended beyond the earlier “Council of Ireland” idea, ultimately resulting in a compromise on implementation bodies rather than fully empowered executive bodies.

McCormick highlighted the importance of **trust-building** within unionism. He referenced how key figures like Lord Empey took significant risks in supporting the agreement, which led to the institutional arrangements that allowed unionists to engage meaningfully with North-South structures. He emphasised that while there is a perception that unionists made greater compromises, the constitutional changes required by the GFA were monumental concessions for nationalists as well.

McCormick’s insights into the detailed, sometimes mundane, aspects of the GFA, such as budgetary cycles and institutional arrangements, demonstrated the complexity involved in creating sustainable governance structures. He also discussed his later experiences overseeing bodies like **InterTradeIreland** and **Tourism Ireland**, noting how the latter’s success, though occasionally criticised by unionists, underscored the potential of all-island cooperation in areas like tourism, which yielded greater benefits than separate efforts.

In terms of Brexit, McCormick viewed the resulting divide between the Irish and UK governments as deeply unfortunate. He argued that resetting these relationships and ensuring that North-South institutions continue to play a constructive role is vital, especially in light of the opportunities presented by the **Windsor Framework**. His overarching message was that the institutional architecture of the GFA, despite its imperfections, remains a crucial underpinning of Northern Ireland’s legitimacy and identity in a post-1998 context.

- Pamela Arthurs:

Pamela Arthurs' speech reflected her extensive experience with cross-border local authority cooperation, particularly in the context of the **East Border Region**, before moving on to the heart of her address: **the evolution of cross-border collaboration**. Arthurs discussed how cooperation between local authorities along the border wasn't popular or well-supported when the East Border Region (EBR) was established in 1975. With no governmental backing or funding, the region faced economic hardship, high unemployment, and significant infrastructure challenges.

Arthurs emphasised that for many years, despite their efforts, these cross-border discussions were little more than a "talking shop" due to the lack of resources. However, the availability of European Union funding in the 1990s became a crucial turning point, enabling the EBR to engage in meaningful cross-border projects. The practical, on-the-ground impact of these initiatives helped shift perceptions, particularly among unionists who were initially wary of the idea. Over time, even unionist members became integral to the organisation, with the EBR eventually having its first DUP chairperson. This demonstrated how inclusivity and cooperation across political lines became central to its operations.

The GFA further legitimised cross-border cooperation, making it more acceptable and expanding the scope of collaboration. However, Arthurs acknowledged the **challenges that Brexit introduced**, as for the first time since the GFA, half of the East Border Region found itself outside the EU. There was uncertainty about whether the councils would continue their cooperation, but a subsequent agreement to sign a charter reaffirmed their commitment. Despite the organisation's successes, Arthurs was clear that cross-border cooperation remains challenging, requiring consistent effort and engagement from local authorities and stakeholders. She concluded by underscoring the importance of **practical cooperation** and its positive impact on the region, emphasising that, while the EBR has managed significant funding and projects, its future depends on maintaining strong partnerships.

- **Thematic Discussion:**

Theme I: Question Segment – Legal Specialist and Association Member asked – about Northern Ireland and 'Northern Irish-ness,' particularly enquiring as to whether the panel members see possibility for a distinct Northern Irish identity to be legitimately embraced by society in the region. In answering this, Dr Andrew McCormick says, 'I think that's a high-level question. There are many manifestations of identity.' He goes on to state how 'the GFA had a mandate *from* the people – and that was one of the most important points of the whole process – [...] and within that, is the right to identify as you choose. [...] It didn't actually say Northern Irish, but the implication is that self-identification right in there that is central.' In sum, 'making room for difference and respecting difference is critical, and finding ways, given that the dynamics have changed, with no longer a unionist majority in the representation – we have a group of others asking for greater rights. [...] And so, we have to recognise the evolving nature of our society.'

Theme II: Question Segment – Mark Hennessy - Senior Political Editor, Irish Times – asked about the formal/informal debate that had been present for the duration of the day. Specifically, asking whether the DUP, and wider unionist representatives, recognise the importance of working *within* the structures of politics now and also the consequences if we 25 years of absence and a drift toward *informality*? Tim O'Connor answering this question, adding how Ahern's sharing of this theme today is "almost like a mark of maturity." Nonetheless, for him, checks and balances and formal agreements have shaped his work on the agreement – "and therefore it was critical that we do not go beyond those parameters due to the implications." Offering an empirical example here, Tim states how in organising the NSMC meetings in the earlier years, he would go to hotels where they were going to be hosted. He recalls how at one occasion, on visiting one that they were hosting in near the border on the northern side, he told the manager of the sensitivities of the meeting, cautioning of "no flags please." The manager responded by saying "don't worry sir, we don't even have a flag pole!" – therefore this is how challenging it all was. This is why formality legitimises these areas of cooperation. On the DUP in particular, he says from what he can see they appear to be willing to operate within the structures.

Adding to this, Dr. Andrew McCormick brings our attention to the '**constructive ambiguity**' of the agreement. Here, he expresses strong alliance to the presentation of the GFA and how it can be viewed in two different ways. For him, without institutions both this principles and the wider agreement itself would never have been reached without structures and institutions. To note, both Mr. O'Connor and Mr. McCormick disagreed with Mr. Ahern's suggestion for cooperation to be widened in a less formalised manner, with Mr. O'Connor specifically mentioning at one stage about 'disagreeing with my old boss'.

4. Panel Two: Strand Two – What's Next?

4.1 Speakers:

- **Dr. Katy Hayward** (Professor of Political Sociology, Queen's University)
- **Newton Emerson** (Independent Journalist)
- **Dr. Etain Tannam** (Associate Professor of International Peace Studies, TCD)
- **Mark Hennessy** (Senior Political Editor, Irish Times)
- **Chair:** Dr. Anthony Soares, Director, Centre for Cross Border Studies
- **Key Themes:**

1. Dr. Katy Hayward:

Dr. Katy Hayward's speech on the future of Northern Ireland and North-South cooperation delved deeply into the long-term impacts of Brexit, highlighting new vulnerabilities and complexities in the post-Brexit era. She framed her insights around four key trends that have emerged as challenges since the UK's departure from the European Union. Here's an expanded explanation of these points:

1. **New Dependencies:** Hayward emphasised that North-South cooperation is no longer simply about the relationship between Belfast and Dublin but is now profoundly shaped by the dynamics between London and Brussels. Brexit has introduced a new layer of dependency, where the nature of the UK-EU relationship significantly influences cross-border interactions. While historically cooperation was dependent on Irish and UK cooperation, Brexit adds Brussels as a critical actor, especially concerning regulatory alignment and trade.
2. **New Complexities:** Northern Ireland's unique post-Brexit position – remaining within both the UK's internal market and the EU's single market for goods – introduces regulatory divergences that could complicate North-South collaboration. Hayward referenced the **Windsor Framework**, which, while offering some stability, overlooks several crucial areas for North-South cooperation, notably environmental protections. This dual-market status creates both opportunities and challenges, as regulations on either side of the Irish border evolve.
3. **New Obscurities:** Hayward pointed to less obvious but significant developments affecting cross-border relations, including the UK's **Electronic Travel Authorization (ETA)** system. This system, which requires non-VISA nationals like EU and US citizens to submit biometric data when traveling to Northern Ireland, could create new barriers for tourism and cross-border movement.
4. **New Sensitivities:** Finally, Hayward highlighted growing sensitivities around Brexit and North-South cooperation, particularly within the unionist community. Her research indicates that while most people support using the NSMC to manage Brexit-related issues, strong unionists are more resistant, associating North-South cooperation with the broader Brexit debate. This reflects a deeper polarisation, with Brexit and the **Windsor Framework** influencing views on the legitimacy and purpose of North-South cooperation. Additionally, she noted rising concerns around immigration, as it becomes a more prominent issue in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, potentially complicating political discourse around the border.

In conclusion, Hayward cautioned that Brexit introduces new vulnerabilities to North-South cooperation, urging policymakers not to become complacent. She emphasised the need for careful implementation and continuous support for the scaffolding of agreements like the **GFA**, the **Withdrawal Agreement**, and the **Trade and Cooperation Agreement** to ensure that cooperation across the border remains effective and resilient in the face of these emerging challenges.

2. Newton Emerson:

Newton begins by framing his core argument: the future of North-South cooperation will be driven by **money** rather than the political structures and agreements that have traditionally underpinned these relationships. He states, “**It’s going to go from a non-issue to a driving issue,**” suggesting that financial investments will become the main engine for cross-border cooperation. His reasoning stems from the Irish government’s “**relatively minor**” financial commitments to Northern Ireland, which he argues have had an outsized symbolic and political impact.

He highlights two examples of this:

1. **€10 million for medical training spaces**, which included 50 places for Northern Irish students.
2. **€44.5 million for a building at the Magee campus, Ulster University**, in Northern Ireland.

These sums, while small in the grand scheme of budgets, caused widespread media reaction. Newton describes this reaction as “**absolutely extraordinary**,” noting that it made headlines internationally and sparked a conversation about Ireland stepping in financially to support Northern Ireland during a time of economic and political instability, with Stormont collapsed and the UK economy sluggish post-Brexit. This resonated with many, Newton suggests, because it fit into an already growing belief that **Ireland would need to financially support Northern Ireland**. He sees these expenditures as early signs of what he calls “**high-pressure leaks**,” indicating an inevitable financial flow from Ireland into the North.

One of the more provocative elements of Newton’s speech is his description of Ireland’s financial intervention as a “**hydraulic inevitability**,” signalling that the economic dynamics between the North and South are shifting in favour of the Republic. He contrasts this with the historical context in which Northern Ireland was established during its most prosperous period, and when the UK was significantly wealthier than Ireland. But, he notes, “**that has now flipped completely**.” Newton’s economic argument underscores a growing **budget surplus in Ireland**, which he believes is likely to result in more financial assistance for Northern Ireland. He emphasises that these two small spending items – €10 million and €44.5 million – had an outsized **symbolic impact** despite their relatively modest size, showing that money, more than political agreements, is likely to dominate future cross-border cooperation.

Newton touches on the sensitive nature of these financial flows within unionist circles, referring to the NSMC as a “**rather dull, sad institution**” that, despite its importance, is actively resisted by unionism. He recalls Lord Empey’s statement that **unionism is determined the NSMC won’t grow**. Yet Newton argues that unionists, historically resistant to such institutions, often “**make a huge fuss**” about them and then “**get over it**.” He reflects on the Anglo-Irish Agreement as a formative political event, particularly in how it severed the relationship between unionism and the police after violent clashes. His memory of this period, including **RUC families being burned out of their homes**, highlights the deep historical tensions that still influence unionist attitudes toward North-South cooperation today.

Newton suggests that financial cooperation between Ireland and Northern Ireland could become more acceptable to unionists, particularly if the sums involved remain small compared to the UK’s **subvention** (financial support) to Northern Ireland. He controversially suggests that **nationalists** are uncomfortable discussing the extent of Northern Ireland’s dependency on UK finances, highlighting a certain “**denial**” about the issue.

Newton concludes by predicting that the next phase of North-South cooperation will be characterised by pragmatic financial decisions rather than the grand political gestures of the past. He argues that “**money talks loudest**,” and as financial cooperation grows, it will shape the future of Northern Ireland’s relationship with both the Republic of Ireland and the UK.

3. Dr. Etain Tannam:

Dr. Etain Tannam's speech presents a critical perspective on the role of institutions in fostering cross-border cooperation, particularly in the post-Brexit landscape. Her insights revolve around the **interdependence of the three strands** of the GFA and the importance of formal institutions to sustain cooperation, especially in challenging times. Tannam opens by emphasising that **Strands 1, 2, and 3** of the GFA are **interdependent and interlocking**, meaning they cannot be effectively addressed in isolation. She argues that **stability** in Northern Ireland's executive cannot be achieved without also addressing the **North-South (Strand 2)** and **British-Irish (Strand 3)** relations. This echoes the **John Hume approach**, which stressed that these strands function as part of an integrated framework for peace and cooperation.

She is particularly concerned that **Strand 3**, which involves **British-Irish intergovernmental relations**, has not been adequately prioritised. Tannam views this strand as **central to the wider agreement**, noting that it has been **forgotten** not only by the public but by the governments involved. Her point here reflects a broader concern that **institutional support** is necessary to maintain the integrity of the entire GFA.

Tannam passionately argues that the **British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC)**, which operates under Strand 3, is critical for maintaining stability. She asserts that **informality is not enough**, referencing comments by **Bertie Ahern** and agreeing with Tim O'Connor's point that institutional structures must be preserved and nurtured to ensure continuity, especially during difficult times. She fears that without the UK being part of the EU, there could be growing **conflicts of interest** between the British and Irish governments, making it more important than ever to have formal structures in place to facilitate dialogue and cooperation. The **EU previously provided an impetus** for cross-border cooperation, and the UK's absence from the bloc heightens the need for institutional frameworks to guide the relationship.

Tannam emphasises that the **leadership of governments** is essential for fostering cross-border cooperation, echoing a model that John Hume derived from his work with the EU. The existence of formal institutions ensures that dialogue continues even in **difficult diplomatic moments**, preserving **institutional memory** and ensuring mechanisms like those envisioned by Hume and **David Trimble** are implemented.

Tannam closes her speech with a forward-looking warning: if a **referendum on Irish unity** occurs, the importance of these institutions will become even more pronounced. The polarizing effects of **identity politics**, which were vividly seen during Brexit and the Windsor Framework negotiations, have not disappeared. She argues that these tensions will likely intensify during a unity referendum, making the **three strands of the agreement** even more crucial for ensuring North-South cooperation continues to function effectively. This speech emphasises the **fragility of informal cooperation** and the **critical role of formal institutions** in ensuring the long-term stability of British-Irish and North-South relations.

4. Mark Hennessy:

In his speech, Mark Hennessy delves into the challenges facing the NSMC and offers several critical reflections on how this body is perceived, both by the public and within political spheres. Hennessy opens by acknowledging the important work being done by those involved in the NSMC, stating that he “**respects people on the field.**” However, he highlights the disconnect between this work and public awareness, arguing that there is “**no public or political understanding**” of the NSMC’s ongoing work. He notes that when searching for NSMC mentions on the **Oireachtas** website, there is little research or discourse, highlighting a **lack of consciousness** about the Council's activities. This leads him to argue that the **conversation around the NSMC** should be more public, stating that “**discussions should not just happen in a room in Queen's University.**”

Hennessy advocates for a shift in focus from **constitutional debates** to practical cooperation, noting that the **NSMC’s work** is about “**helping people in their day-to-day lives**” and should not be seen as a threat. If the public understood the pragmatic benefits, he argues, they would be more open to North-South cooperation. He points to historical moments of **effective North-South cooperation**, notably during the **foot-and-mouth crisis**, which was one of the few times the public saw genuine ministerial collaboration between the two governments. This moment, in his view, showcases the **potential of the NSMC** when functioning optimally.

However, Hennessy raises a concern about the **NSMC’s future**, stating that after 25 years, its existence could be in jeopardy due to the **increasing damage to relations** between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. He echoes **Newton Emerson’s point** about spending, noting that despite Ireland’s financial contributions, there is little interest in these stories in the South. For many, the cross-border funding initiatives are seen as purely **pragmatic solutions**, with people simply thinking, “**a check was available, and it was done.**”

Hennessy warns against complacency, emphasising that Ireland has a “**profound understanding**” that financial resources should not be squandered. He cautions against assuming that **Ireland's current wealth** will always be available for **cross-border solutions**, pointing out the country's history of landing in financial crises every few decades. This financial caution extends to the **NSMC**, with Hennessy stressing that without **formal operations** and careful use of resources, there could be significant difficulties down the line.

Addressing the **DUP’s** resistance to the NSMC, Hennessy states that the **communiqué** from the NSMC was largely focused on **shared island funding**, something the DUP **disliked**. Despite this, he underscores the **value of structures**, warning that without them, the NSMC could evolve into an institution “**with no structure at all.**” He references the rapid changes of the last 20 years, urging people not to forget **how hard things were** and to remember the reasons why these **structures were important** for voters during the **GFA referendum**. In his concluding remarks, Hennessy stresses the **importance of maintaining the NSMC’s structure**, recognising the **fragility** of institutions and the risks of neglecting them. He believes the **NSMC’s value lies in its structure**, which was created to ensure cooperation and benefit the people, and calls for a stronger public understanding and political commitment to its work.

- **Thematic Discussion:**

Theme I: Question Segment – Dr. Anthony Soares Question – to all panellists focusing in on each of their areas of critique and debate relating to North-South cooperation. Remarkably,

although the questions were pointing at different political matters, the consistent call for a refocus on institutional integrity was repeated in all of the panel participants' responses. **Dr Etain Tannam**, in particular, heralded the necessity of British-Irish intergovernmental relations under the BIIGC – remaining in line with the GFA – ‘despite opposition from some unionists.’ **Newton Emerson** and **Mark Hennessy** further this point, while in agreement with institutional structures, questioning “**why the political system is afraid of its own shadow? – is it more about the occupation of power than anything else?**”

Continuing on this theme then, another question was raised by Irish Association Member, Dr Chris McGimpsey, pertaining to **constructive ambiguities** in the agreement. He thinks it is very dangerous, and that in the Northern Ireland context there has to be a different system or ‘way’ of politics – ‘a science for unionists and an artform for nationalists’ – this process will eventually **run into trouble due to this basis of architecture**. In response, **Mark Hennessy** was in total agreement, although stated that there are times that it has served us well – “although we don’t know that it will serve us well always.” He is very struck by the growth of “**cheap, green nationalism**” which is partly as a reflection of confidence and partly a reflection of the Troubles being more of a thing of the past. He goes on to finally state how – “that does tell us something about things that are going on, and its not good.” On the other hand, **Newton Emerson** and **Dr Etain Tannam**, felt otherwise and saw constructive ambiguity as a potentially mobilising force for unionists, stating how the “**language of the agreement**” could be useful. Nonetheless, Etain furthers the point by conversely stating how some language is problematically used in vague terms – words like ‘**honest broker**’ and ‘**guardianship**’ – which she says need to be defined in order for unionists and nationalists alike to implement the agreement in full.

5. Conclusion

Each speaker provided unique insights that collectively shed light on the importance of institutions, historical memory, and pragmatic cooperation as the region navigates its post-Brexit reality.

Bertie Ahern and Lord Empey provided insights from their extensive political careers, stressing the importance of **personalities and leadership** in maintaining North-South relations. Ahern, reflecting on his role in the peace process, highlighted the need for **institutional pragmatism**, while Lord Empey underscored the delicate nature of unionism in the context of North-South cooperation, expressing concerns about a **creeping erosion of unionist trust** in the post-Brexit era.

The NSMC Joint Secretaries brought a more technical perspective, highlighting the **day-to-day importance of cross-border institutions**. They stressed the **undervalued role** of such bodies in practical governance, urging greater public and political recognition of their work. In spite of political disruptions, nearly 350 ministerial meetings have taken place since the NSMC’s inception, reflecting the commitment of both governments to maintaining North-South relations and the durability of the council.

Tim O’Connor echoed the importance of **institutional memory** and **continuity**, warning that informal cooperation alone is not enough to sustain progress. Dr. Katy Hayward,

Dr. Eitan Tannam, and Dr. Andrew McCormick also emphasised the critical role of **institutions** in bridging political divides, particularly in the face of **rising identity politics**. Tannam, in particular, warned against the fragility of cooperation without formal structures, suggesting that **intergovernmental mechanisms** need strengthening to withstand future challenges, especially if a referendum on Irish unity occurs.

Mark Hennessy and Newton Emerson closed with reflections on the role of public engagement and money. (I have put these this way round) . Hennessy advocated for more **visible and transparent North-South cooperation**, urging a public conversation that highlights the **pragmatic benefits** of cross-border initiatives. Emerson's speech focused on the **financial pragmatism** of recent North-South investments, pointing out that small-scale spending initiatives, though symbolically powerful, may not be sustainable without **larger institutional and financial frameworks**.

Collectively, these voices illustrate the **interdependence of political institutions, financial pragmatism and public trust**. At the same time they reveal how Strand II, through the work of the NSMC and these implementation bodies and areas of cooperation, has given new emphasis and reality to cooperation. As Northern Ireland continues to face Brexit-related challenges, sustaining cooperation between the North and the South will require both a respect for institutional frameworks and a willingness to innovate.

Symposium #1 proceedings account:
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as edited by The Irish Association