



The Centre for  
Cross Border Studies

# MEDIA WATCH

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## Dangerous for Dublin to turn away from North - Andy Pollak

CO-OPERATION BETWEEN Ireland and Northern Ireland, one of the cornerstones of the 1998 Belfast Agreement, is distinctly out of fashion these days.

Since the international financial crisis took hold in 2008 and the final piece in the Northern jigsaw was put in place in 2010 with the return of justice and policing powers to Stormont, it is clear that Government, Civil Service, business and media in Dublin see the North as far lower down their agendas than in previous years.

All this is understandable. Ministers are taken up with implementing the heavy cutbacks imposed by the "troika" with their implications for vital areas such as health, education and social welfare.

A few Ministers such as the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Education Ruairí Quinn would like to do more for North-South co-operation, but they simply don't have the time or the capacity in present difficult circumstances.

This turning away from the North and North-South co-operation can be seen in every sector: the withdrawal of the Government's single largest financial commitment to the North – the promised €470 million in funding for the Monaghan-Derry road; the transfer of civil servants dealing with North-South co-operation to other areas; the effective ending of the joint council between the two business confederations, IBEC and CBI, with the winding-up of its secretariat; the decline in the number of undergraduates crossing the Border to study in the other jurisdiction (in Trinity College Dublin, the most popular Irish university for Northerners, the number of Northern students fell by 23 per cent between 2005 and 2010); and even the reduction of The Irish Times reporting staff in Belfast from two to one.

Surprisingly, Sinn Féin also do not seem that interested in the painstaking work of trying to bring the two jurisdictions closer together. Observers say their Ministers do little to speed up the snail's pace agenda set by the DUP at North-South ministerial council meetings. Maybe they are frustrated with the very limited amount of co-operation that can be agreed at such meetings, or maybe they do not want to give the Government a cross-Border success story it can then claim as its own.

Sinn Féin's failure to take on the influential enterprise, trade and investment portfolio in the new Northern Ireland Executive – with its potentially important North-South dimension – spoke volumes for their reluctance to face up to the difficult decisions confronting policymakers in Ireland, North and South, in the coming years. They prefer to remain a left-wing protest party, snapping at Fianna Fáil's heels in Dublin and hiding behind the DUP's leadership of the powersharing executive in Belfast.

On the positive side, there is now a whole new infrastructure of North-South bodies and co-operative networks that did not exist 15-20 years ago.

The North-South Ministerial Council and the seven North-South bodies and companies continue their necessary work. Beside and beyond government there are new bodies in education (Centre for Cross Border Studies, Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South); health (Cooperation and Working Together, Institute of Public Health in Ireland); and planning (International Centre for Local and Regional Development).

Cooperation Ireland and the Corrymeela and Glencree Communities continue to work for peace and mutual understanding despite an ever harsher funding climate.

We have the European Union's Peace and cross-Border INTERREG programmes to thank for much of the funding that has sustained such initiatives over the past 15 years, although it too has decreased in recent years.

We must never forget that the practical, often humdrum work of these bodies and networks is now part of a North-South architecture which was constructed by far-sighted politicians and civil servants over long months and years of negotiations in the mid-1990s. It was based on the belief that North-South institutions – alongside internal Northern Ireland and east-west institutions – were crucial to begin the slow process of breaking down fear and suspicion and building understanding between the two Northern communities and between the two parts of the island. This is the concern that many of us have as we see attention in influential circles in Dublin turning away from Northern Ireland: that both politicians and people in the South will sit back in the belief that the "Northern question" has been resolved. The truth is more uncomfortable.

It is that the DUP and Sinn Féin remain tribal parties who are involved in an uneasy marriage of convenience.

There is little appetite in either party for engaging in the hard, long drawn out task of constructing a non-sectarian society to overcome the North's continuing divisions: the so-called "shared future" concept, which was jettisoned in a deeply flawed Northern Ireland Executive programme called Cohesion, Sharing and Integration in 2010. This dropped the direct rule goal of "reconciliation" in favour of "mutual accommodation" between "cultures and communities." The result is that there is no agreed framework to address the North's enduring central problem of sectarianism.

The facts are stark. Some 90 per cent of social housing is still segregated. Over 93 per cent of children are in separate schools. The number of "peace walls" in Belfast has grown from 22 in 1998 to either 48 or 88, depending on how one defines a "peace wall".

In this situation the peace on the ground has to be fragile – although the political institutions are clearly secure – and there must be a continuing role for the British and Irish governments in working together to oversee and contain the communalist instincts of the two main parties.

Here is one final idea for London and Dublin. It appears that the proposal for a low corporation tax for Northern Ireland, comparable to the 12.5 per cent rate in the Republic, is probably off the table. So what about a big push instead for improving public services in both jurisdictions through a programme of North-South "value for money" co-operation in areas such as health, higher education and environmental services?

My sources tell me that the UK treasury would not be averse to such a proposal.

**Source:** <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/dangerous-for-dublin-to-turn-away-from-north-1.438547>

5 January 2016

## Politicians rapped for bridge U-turn

AN SDLP MP has accused Stormont and Dublin of "political ineptitude" over the failure to develop the Narrow Water Bridge project.

Margaret Ritchie said the people of south Down and Co Louth have been "seriously let down" after European Union money earmarked for the bridge was withdrawn. She warned that electoral promises for major infrastructure projects did not appear to include the bridge near Warrenpoint.

The South Down MP's attack came after Regional Development Minister Michelle McIlveen said she was unaware of any plans to bring the plan back to life.

She said the proposal was made and sponsored primarily as a tourism project under the European Union's INTERREG IV programme.

Answering a question from Sinn Fein's Caitriona Ruane, she said: "My department has, and has had, very limited interaction with the original project, other than on those matters relating to bridge orders and licensing.

"I am unaware of any specific intentions in bringing the project back to life, although I have heard speculation in news reports."

Ms Ritchie said: "This is a project which could have a transformative effect on our economy and on **North/South** partnership, and yet it has been beset by delays and political ineptitude which have seriously let down the people of south Down and Louth.

"We have already heard shallow electoral promises about infrastructure projects but it seems that Narrow Water Bridge didn't even deserve a mention."

**Source:** <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/politicians-rapped-for-narrow-water-bridge-uturn-34335552.html>

5 January 2016

## Another milestone reached on difficult road to stability in Northern Ireland

The Republic's Foreign Minister, Charlie Flanagan, says the Fresh Start document gives grounds for optimism, but without the legacy institutions envisaged in the Stormont House Agreement we risk the toxins of the past poisoning the politics of the present.

The year 2015 was another politically turbulent one in Northern Ireland that involved the presence of the Irish Government for an intensive talks period over two-and-a-half months in the autumn.

I was very pleased, however, to see out the year with the conclusion of the Fresh Start agreement - yet another milestone in Northern Ireland's journey towards long-term peace and stability.

During the autumn talks process I hosted an event in Dublin to mark the 30th anniversary of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. This event brought into sharp focus just how much has been achieved in Northern Ireland over the past three decades; it reminded me why this peace process is so important and strengthened my resolve to see a successful conclusion to this latest round of talks in the form of the Fresh Start agreement.

Since my appointment as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade in July 2014, with a strong mandate from the Taoiseach, I have made Northern Ireland a priority - for me personally and for my department.

On my first day in office I telephoned Secretary of State Theresa Villiers to discuss our roles as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement and how we could best work together to realise the full promise and potential of that transformational document.

I know that many people feel frustrated by what must seem like the neverending crises in Northern Ireland politics. However, in spite of occasional moments of shrill rhetoric and interludes of sterile impasse, the overall trajectory remains one of progress towards stable politics and a peaceful society.

In fact, implementation of many aspects of the Stormont House and Fresh Start agreements has already begun, with a firm timetable in place for dealing with many of the other important and challenging issues - including bringing an end to the toxic legacy of paramilitarism.

The Fresh Start agreement represents a major step towards normalising politics in Northern Ireland. Failure in these talks may well have precipitated the collapse of the devolved institutions; it is to the great credit of the Northern Ireland parties that they were determined to succeed and to avoid that calamity.

They fully understand that the people of Northern Ireland want a functioning power-sharing government that delivers effective services for its citizens.

Therefore, while the tree of politics may bend, it has yet to break. There is a firm resolve among all those engaged in the autumn talks, myself included, to build a peaceful, reconciled, prosperous Northern Ireland that its people deserve.

This means taking a firm stance against the remaining pernicious influence and legacy of paramilitarism, while ensuring the success of devolved government that operates on the basis of partnership, inclusion and equality.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 formally recognised the right of the Irish Government to put forward views and proposals in regard to the governance of Northern Ireland.

This was transcended by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which provided an institutional basis to properly reflect the totality of relationships across these islands.

The Irish Government takes its role as a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement very seriously and I feel privileged to have represented the government in the various talks that have taken place during the course of the last 18 months.

We all prosper when Northern Ireland prospers. The stability of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland is important for the success of the island of Ireland.

A stable government in Belfast is key to building a strong local economy and will contribute significantly to the prosperity of the island as a whole.

I truly believe that all the people on this island - and especially those living in the border region - benefit when we work together to advance **north-south** economic and social co-operation.

By working together on a small island, we can make the best use of its finite resources for the benefit of the greatest number of our citizens.

The Irish Government is committed to working with the Northern Ireland Executive to make this happen. We have committed (EURO)110m (£80m) under the Fresh Start agreement to **cross-border** projects that will help create jobs and unlock the full potential of the island economy.

This work of building peace, reconciliation and good neighbourly relations is not always easy.

There are many problems still to be resolved, but - considering where we were in 1985 - we are in a stronger position than ever before to successfully overcome the remaining challenges.

While I enter 2016 in a hopeful mood, I am also very conscious of the work that still needs to be done.

We must not lose sight of what, regrettably, was not achieved in 2015 - namely, the establishment of the legacy institutions envisaged in the Stormont House Agreement.

I am determined that agreement will be reached on these outstanding sensitive issues, but it will take commitment, courage and flexibility from the governments, the political parties and civil society if we are to find a way through this apparent zero-sum impasse.

Nevertheless, it is imperative that a solution be found. We owe it to the victims and survivors and we owe it to ourselves, since we cannot risk the toxins of the past poisoning the politics of the present.

So, taking heart from what has been achieved on the journey over the last 30 years, let us resolve in the centenary of the Easter Rising and the Somme to agree a way of dealing with the past so that it contributes to peace and reconciliation on the island we all share and we all cherish.

Charlie Flanagan is the Republic's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

**Source:** <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/news-analysis/another-milestone-reached-on-difficult-road-to-stability-in-northern-ireland-34334866.html>