



The Centre for
Cross Border Studies

MEDIA WATCH

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We owe it to victims not to take peace for granted

FORMER US senator George Mitchell was very much to the fore this week in the events commemorating the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. And he deserves all of the praise he got; without his calm demeanour and wise words, I've no doubt that the agreement would have been more difficult to reach.

What was interesting during his speeches at these events, however, was the rather pointed warning that we should not take peace for granted. I wondered to myself: to whom exactly is he addressing these remarks? There is no doubt that the present British government, and some of its predecessors, have taken their eye off the ball, and left the nurturing of the peace process to its own devices.

Indeed, as far back as the mid-Noughties, Gordon Brown, the then prime minister, made clear to us in the Irish Government that, as far as his government was concerned, the Northern Ireland issue had been sorted, and his focus from then on would be on the fight against international terrorism targeted at Britain.

The efforts of recent Irish governments to bring the issues of Northern Ireland to the fore have tended to fall flat. Any American influence on the Irish situation has long dissipated. Previously, it had been a key factor in bringing the parties, and indeed the two governments, together.

THE influence of our joint membership of the European Union with our near neighbours had been an important factor in bringing peace to the island. But Brexit is looming threat on the horizon. So while we should rightly celebrate the momentous coming together, this week 20 years ago, of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, we should also demand that our leaders, be they in the south, the north or across the water, refocus on the implementation of the guiding principles laid down in the agreement. During the Good Friday Agreement negotiations, Mr Mitchell constantly reminded the participants of the need to remember the victims of the Troubles, and especially the ongoing anguish of the families of loved ones who were killed and maimed.

The focus this week on Mr Mitchell reminds me of a constituent of mine, who sadly passed away a few years ago, having in his latter years been diagnosed with a life-ending and debilitating illness. Before he died, he made his own personal act of thanks and congratulations to Mr Mitchell. The late John Hanlon lived in Cooley in Co. Louth and ran a very successful haulage business.

His sister, Bridie, is the widow of the late Tom Oliver, who was abducted, tortured and brutally murdered by the IRA on July 19, 1991. At the time, the priest who was called to the murder scene remarked that it looked as if his killers had 'dropped concrete blocks on every bone of his body'.

It's believed that Mr Oliver, in the course of carrying out drain-age on his farm, came across a barrel under the ground and reported the discovery to the gardaí. It transpired that the barrel contained a hidden cache of IRA arms. The IRA, in their twisted logic, had Tom Oliver murdered because they regarded him as an informer.

John Hanlon was, until the day he died, deeply affected and traumatised, as were the rest of his immediate family.

The murder of Tom Oliver caused huge disquiet across the Cooley Peninsula, particularly because it was believed that a number of IRA figures living in the area carried out his murder.

Sometime after the Good Friday Agreement, I was contacted by my former legal partner, John Woods, who acted on behalf of John Hanlon. He stated that John wanted a presentation be made on his behalf to Mr Mitchell, as a thanks in the name of all victims of violence arising out of the Northern conflict.

John Hanlon believed that Mr Mitchell was pivotal in bringing peace to the island.

It transpired that John had previously tuned in to an auction show for charity on The Late Late Show on RTÉ. Over the telephone on the live programme, he successfully bid for a magnificent Waterford Crystal ornament depicting peace, represented by a dove, winning out over evil, represented by a serpent. He paid (EURO)30,000 for this masterpiece.

Mr Mitchell was due to be a guest speaker at a cross-border conference in the Slieve Russell Hotel in Cavan shortly afterwards, in September 1998. So it was arranged that we would use that occasion to make the presentation to Mr Mitchell.

In typical fashion, John did not feel confident enough to make the presentation himself.

It was agreed that the presentation would be made by two other speakers at the conference; Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, and the Victims Commissioner and former tánaiste, John Wilson. While John Hanlon was adamant he wanted the presentation to be anonymous, in the end, both John Woods and I convinced him to be present so that a photograph could be taken to mark the occasion. During the ceremony, Mr Mitchell remarked how honoured and humbled he felt at receiving such a presentation.

JOHN Hanlon, while he was alive, and the rest of the Oliver family have fought so that those responsible for Tom Oliver's murder be brought to justice. Indeed, the gardaí recently said that a live investigation into the killing was ongoing.

The 20th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement is a poignant reminder of the many thousands, like Tom Oliver, who were murdered and maimed on both of these islands.

The agreement in its preamble states that 'we can best honour them (the victims) through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust, and the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.' The present custodians of politics across these two islands would do well to re-commit themselves to implementing these sentiments.

They owe it to all who are grieving after their loved ones to put aside their differences. And they need to ensure that future generations don't suffer the same trauma that families such as the Oliver family have had to suffer.

Source: The Irish Daily Mail

19 April 2018

London and Dublin could both work to benefit North

The inquiry into Stormont's Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scandal has only sat since last November and only interviewed DUP leader Arlene Foster for the first time last week. Yet already the cloud of detail is a challenge to report.

Cynics might say this is the point of inquiries, but if so it does not always succeed. Damaging perceptions of politicians can still be reinforced through passing glimpses of their testimony. This appears to be happening to Foster, who has defended herself on the grounds that she was not interested in energy policy and her officials should have sorted it out.

The inquiry's verdict on specific blame could be years away. In the meantime, the first overarching theme to emerge has been something of a surprise - namely, that Northern Ireland is too small to have a separate administrative existence.

Testimony from civil servants revealed they have to copy over complex policies from Britain and adapt them for Northern Ireland despite being able to devote just a few members of staff to the task, in contrast to the hundreds who might have been working on it in London.

A key motivation when adapting policies, as explained by inquiry witnesses, is a cargo cult-like focus on getting more money into Northern Ireland no matter how wasteful this is overall. In one instance, officials knowingly cost the British taxpayer £300 million to save Stormont £3.5 million because that was rational from their standalone perspective.

Jaw-dropping mistakes Suddenly, the jaw-dropping mistakes of RHI look like an inevitable feature of how Northern Ireland is run. This explanation may have been offered in defence of how administrators were doing their jobs but it is an indictment of the system that employs them. Northern Ireland replicates the UK's entire government structure in miniature, in addition to being a self-contained legal jurisdiction. It has its own civil service, distinct from the UK or so-called home civil service, managing departments in Belfast as if it is all a little copy of Whitehall. This has been the

case since the foundation of the state and has endured through direct rule and devolution. The model was not followed when Scotland and Wales were devolved - all civil servants there remain part of the home service.

The Belfast Agreement doubled the number of departments in Northern Ireland from six to 12, purely to give every party a seat around the Executive table. In 2016, Sinn Féin and the DUP reduced this to nine and cut the number of civil servants by 3,000, or over 10 per cent. Both parties were acting on the near-universal view that Northern Ireland is over-governed for a place of its size - it still has more civil servants than Scotland, which has three times the population. Rather than reversing this view, the RHI inquiry has introduced a contradiction: despite being over-governed, Northern Ireland is also under-governed. It is precisely the wrong size to replicate Whitehall.

Structural reform to address this could go a lot further than cutting departments. Welsh devolution is arranged like a large council, while Scotland has given more thought to how national and regional bureaucracies interact. Stormont has shifted some of its remit down to recently enlarged councils, although not as much as planned.

Fundamental problem of scale But there are only so many ways you can rearrange the chairs in the office before hitting a fundamental problem of scale. The more that is expected of modern government, the more it looks doomed in Northern Ireland to failure, waste and amateurism. Perhaps scale is only a problem because in administrative terms the

North is pretending to be England, a country 30 times its size.

One solution this points to is a united Ireland, although its simplest implication is a more integrated UK - the mainstream unionist position before the agreement.

Or perhaps the problem is just pretending to be a country. Northern Ireland has the same population as Latvia. Nobody is suggesting that Baltic nation is ungovernable but neither is anyone keen on its example, with a public sector share of the economy half of that in Northern Ireland.

As the constitutional question cancels out and cutting services down to an efficient size is unthinkable, there is a chance for the RHI inquiry to provoke more practical ideas. A sustainable administration in Northern Ireland would need to do less on its own, while looking to east-west and north-south partnerships for delivery.

Back office functions, such as social security administration, might be better handled on a UK-wide basis. Civil servants in London and Belfast should work together when laws and policies are copied over. Frontline services requiring economies of scale, such as health and third-level education, might be better approached on a cross-Border basis. Dublin could help if EU laws and policies have to be copied over.

If Stormont cannot get its act together, the British and Irish governments should consider discussing arrangements regardless. Tellingly, reforming how Northern Ireland is run might be easier in Stormont's absence.

Source: The Irish Times