

You Don't Slow Down Peace

Brian Rowan

Brian Rowan is a former BBC correspondent and security editor in Belfast. Since the late 1980s, he has reported on all the major developments on Northern Ireland's journey from war to peace; the ceasefires, political agreements, prisoner releases, police reform, demilitarisation, the ending of the armed campaign and the numerous efforts to build a legacy process.



Four times he has been a category winner in the Northern Ireland Press and Broadcast awards, including twice as Specialist Journalist of the Year. He left the BBC in 2005, the year the IRA ended its armed campaign. He still comments and writes regularly on the issue of legacy, and his analysis is often sought on the troubled politics of peace. Rowan's latest book – *Living with Ghosts* – was published in September 2022.

My first reaction must be one of sorrow — and shame. It is sorrow not only at the tragic loss of lives of men and women, and even children but also at the much larger crowd of those behind them, those bereaved of loved ones, those bearing in their minds and bodies the wounds and disabilities inflicted by this ongoing violence, of homes shattered and honest businesses destroyed. It is shame that it has gone on so long, how there still seems to be no end in sight — and how for most of us, these casualties become no more than statistics.

Former Presbyterian Moderator Dr Jack Weir, August 1992

The words above were given to me at the moment in the conflict period when we were approaching three thousand deaths. The late Dr Jack Weir had typed some thoughts in preparation for an interview with me for the

BBC. At different points in those ‘Troubles’ years, he engaged directly with the IRA and loyalists to end the killing. In his note that he gave me, he wrote of the “utter failure” of violence, yet how for those engaged in it became “addictive” – “with the delusion that success may come with stepping up the violence, having one more heave”. That period of the early 1990s is remembered for the killing rage of the loyalist organisations — what I have called *the hell before the calm*. And while there was no obvious end in sight, we were closer than we thought to new possibilities. Within two years, the ‘long war’ would give way to a long process of trying to build peace.

The challenge of building peace is in the making of relationships, in how difficult that task was (and is). Over the best part of three decades, since the original ceasefires of 1994, our learning tells us that peace is not the product of some wish and not something delivered by magic. Instead, it is a stop-start, always a work-in-progress — a tug-of-war between momentum and stasis — a seemingly endless political negotiation.

The broken glass of Brexit

Brexit has tested relationships within Britain, the UK and Europe, British-Irish, North-South and at Stormont. Like shattered glass, smashed pieces scattered everywhere. Every relationship is strained, some broken. We watched as the *Protocol* became a street issue. I suppose it is a phase in this process characterised by a rewind button. A reminder that the *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* was not and is not our final settlement. The negotiated balances and compromises of 1998 have been disturbed.

In Northern Ireland, we see a post-Brexit trend. Unionists lost their overall Stormont majority in 2017 and their second seat in the 2019 European Election. Following the UK General Election of that year, they no longer hold a majority of the Northern Ireland seats at Westminster. In 2022, Sinn Féin emerged as the largest political party in the Assembly vote. The *New Ireland* conversation is louder. Our politics is turning a bend onto a new road. The tug-of-peace is the pull between ‘union’ versus ‘unity’. As this develops, relationships will be as taut and tense as the rope in that challenge.

Perhaps we expected too much from peace.

Underestimated the work.

Believed that things would develop more quickly.

Forgot that our starting point was in the trenches of enemy relationships.

During the conflict period, all we had to do was condemn and blame each other. Peace asks something more of all of us: that we question and challenge ourselves as much as we question and challenge others.

Can we build peace in the present with the past, and its many unanswered questions, so close to us? Do we have the relationships, the leaders, the trust, and the will to pause for now and to go back? For what purpose? Is it for the right reasons of ‘truth’, healing, reconciliation, to build better foundations, or is it simply to revisit the conflict period in some tragic play of winners & losers and right & wrong? The past is still an argument, the go-to place when relationships are strained or broken, where we find the stones and the bricks to throw — often in glass houses.

As we argue *now*, we forget where we *were* — the hopelessness of the conflict period, how we became dehumanised and numb, and how death became normal, reduced to numbers and news. The comments of Jack Weir serve to remind us of that. Yet, in the dark of those years, relationships developed that allowed us to begin to think differently of hope and peace. It was whispered at first before it found its confidence and its voice.

Governments don’t talk to terrorists. Until they do

We can get lost in the blizzard of actual time. Part of my learning across several decades of reporting conflict and peace is that there are two stages — the one we see and the one hidden from us. Think back to 1993 and the revelation of the contacts between the UK Government and the republican leadership.

What is the learning in this? First, there is no way out of ‘war’ other than through dialogue. Second, governments don’t talk with ‘terrorists’ — until they do.

The revelation of those contacts was an earthquake moment, yet we were closer than we could have imagined to some new beginning. Trenches are dug deeper before people come out of them. An escalation in violence is part of the negotiation of peace, part of not surrendering — that instinct not to lose, even when you know you can’t win.

More than anyone else in this period, the late John Hume — leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) who would become a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize — understood the importance of dialogue and

building relationships and roads that opened up new possibilities. So he accepted the invitation to speak with the then Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams, a dialogue that began in the 1980s and continued through to the original ceasefire and beyond. Hume used all of his contacts — the many relationships — in Dublin, Europe and the United States — to bring us to a better place.

I do not hear Hume's voice in our politics today — meaning the learning and experience he left us. From the late 1980s into the 1990s, he looked for higher ground to enable him and others to see a way through. Where are that vision and leadership today? Have we already forgotten those 'Bloody Everyday's' of conflict, and have we taken our peace — however flawed — for granted? Many of the leaders of that period are no longer with us. The ones that shouldered the weight of change; stepped out from the safety of their crowd into places where dialogue, conversation, and compromise are more difficult questions of leadership.

From my experience, I understand the importance of having the broadest possible working relationships, an open mind, and the ability to talk with all sides. Building those relationships took time. Establishing trust is not something that happens in a conversation or two. To understand possibilities in processes, you must try to understand the many different perspectives. I had to build working relationships with the IRA (Irish Republican Army), loyalist organisations, those across the frame of security and intelligence, political leaders, church leaders, those who understood the pulse of the different communities, and, in this work, understanding the importance of a small circle of trusted colleagues as second, third and fourth opinions.

I wrote recently that without that reach and access, it would be impossible to assess potential within negotiations accurately — those numerous talks processes that have stretched from the early ceasefire period to today. At times, those relationships broke down. Most could be repaired. Some could not. None of it was or is cosy. Nor should it be. My role in reporting over several decades was to assess statements, not parrot them. The latter is to be a mouthpiece. I also understand that no matter how good your sources are, you never have the complete picture. There is no such thing as a perfect reporting record of conflict or peace. Reporting the latter is a much more significant challenge. It might seem strange to say or write, but you can become comfortable in 'war'. You get used to it. You form a relationship with the abnormal to the point where it becomes normal. It is an illness, I suppose,

a virus that spread through those decades of the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and beyond — a virus when there was no vaccine.

Have we now switched off in the peace?

I have written about this in my latest book — *Living with Ghosts*. How, in the conflict period, we could become detached from the news, the killing, the bombs, and the bullets — and how we separated ourselves from the day-to-day of death. Not that we were uncaring, but that, at times, we were not caring enough. I suppose it is losing yourself in conflict, trying to create distance, our heads and hearts not being able to hold it all. It becomes too much, and we switch off. I watched every news hour in those early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I watched until I could watch no more. Of course, death and destruction are on a much greater scale, but my point is the same. There is only so much of this that you can absorb. As leaders and people, have we now switched off in the peace — become tired and complacent, perhaps, even bored?

Peace needs energy and momentum. You don't slow it down. Not if you want it to work. The conflict generation has developed an ownership relationship with those big moments of the 1990s — the ceasefires, the political/peace agreement of 1998, and the *Patten Report* on police reform the following year. Also, an ownership of the past to the point where we have become stuck. At times, it still seems more important than the present. Yet those big moments of the 1990s were about trying to free the next generations, allowing them the creativity, imagination, and space to make something different — something better. *Their* relationships on this island of Ireland — and between the islands, with Europe, the United States, and others.

This is what we are holding back — attaching heavier weights to the next challenges. Making things more difficult for those next generations; making peace *the daily grind* rather than something to look forward to, to cherish. We are creating obstacles — not paths. We are doing the opposite of Hume, fearing peace and what comes after the *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement*. Fearful of that bend taking us onto a different road, those who can see and read that trend in post-Brexit politics won't acknowledge it because to do so would be to accept the blindness of that decision. The impact on patiently developed relationships. What does it mean long-term for the union? How has it disturbed those compromises and agreements of 1998? And, as we

listen, the loudest voices we now hear quoting the *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* are those who opposed it at that time.

Might we have to wait for the working out of this next bend, that next big political moment and decision — the question of ‘union’ versus ‘unity’ — before we can adequately assess the longer-term prospects of peace? Is it that next conversation and referendum — however close or far away — that will determine, more than the *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement*, the relationships, politics, and shape of this island? Might the best place to have the Northern Ireland conversation be within that *New Ireland* debate? A dialogue to first define ‘New Ireland’ and answer the questions before we ask them in a border poll. The questions of health and education within some new all-island frame, pensions, the economic credibility and viability of such a project, the transition, and how it is supported by Britain and Ireland, Europe and the United States. Questions also of culture and identity and allegiance. Would there be a distinct northern political entity/assembly/parliament? The lesson of Brexit is to know your answers before you ask the questions. Such is the importance to the present and future; this should be a conversation that begins on a blank sheet of paper. The ‘New Ireland’ cannot (should not) be the two parts of this island being bolted together — the broken relationships being fitted and fixed with some cheap glue. New should mean something better.

The lengthy obituary of the union

It is these unanswered questions that drain the momentum out of our politics. The uncertainty. The fears about what comes next. How many times has Stormont collapsed? It does not work on its own. This process needs the relationships that brought us the ceasefires and the political agreement in the 1990s. The critical internal relationships. North-South, British-Irish, Europe and the United States. If you break the template, you break the process. This place does not work unless the two governments are involved in a joint effort. That is the lesson of the *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* and the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement of January 2020 — the agreement that rescued Stormont from a three-year purgatory. We need to look to the approaches of Blair-Ahern and Smith-Coveney to find what works. Unilateral runs are usually down blind alleys. The lengthy obituary of the union is written by those most closely linked to it in their heads and hearts. We read it in the lines which are the daily tales of woe, lines which ignore the causes.

Nothing is fixed if you ignore the breaking point. Why is there a *Protocol* and a sea border? Because of Brexit and the negotiated withdrawal agreement. The Johnson Government tried to rewrite that script as if its fingerprints were not on its pages. The truth of Brexit is that it was primarily an England project. Northern Ireland was an afterthought. They told us the lie of the sea border, the denial of its existence until it could *not* be denied. The real story is not just about the additional paperwork of trade, but something stretched across a wider frame. That Northern Ireland became different within the union. Brexit is the heavy machinery that has made those cracks on fragile ground. Now it is everyone else's fault, and Europe represents the bogeyman within the script that sometimes singles out Ireland and France.

Should we be surprised that we have arrived at this point? I think the answer is no. The political agreement of 1998 was driven in Britain by a labour government — by Blair and Mowlam. It is their trophy. The United States was directly involved — at the level of President Clinton, with Senator George Mitchell steering the talks. This trophy is where you find the emotional attachment to that deal. They cleared the obstacles to all-party talks. They better understood the processes of change and that peace is not about surrender. The loyalist representatives of that period — David Ervine, Gusto Spence, William Smith, Billy Hutchinson, Gary McMichael and David Adams — helped the Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble carry the weight of that agreement. The heavyweights of power-sharing, prisoner releases and police reform. More than that, they explained to republicans that any move to further reduce the period of prisoner releases from two years to one would jeopardise the entire agreement and could push Trimble over the edge. Loyalists and republicans talking, negotiating, in a way that, only a few years previously, would have been considered unthinkable. In this period, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) was outside the tent. We had to wait until 2019 for a Conservative NI Secretary of State, Julian Smith, who correctly understood the *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* and, more importantly, the essential ingredient of British-Irish cooperation. Weeks after rescuing Stormont in a political initiative alongside Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney, Johnson sacked Smith. That decision, alongside the post-Brexit arrangements, spoke loudly of little interest or concern about this place.

Add to this the UK Government's unilateral approach to legacy — its legislation and process to address the past. It is a move shaped by the self-interest of the Conservative Party and one that ignores relationships; it

speaks either of not understanding the complexities of this issue or of not caring about such sensitivities. No side from the conflict period can or should shape such a process. The proposed *Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Retrieval* is a house that very few will buy. The design of this process, the approach, is about shutting down the past, not opening it up to the scrutiny and answers needed to move into the present and future. The Johnson legacy in Northern Ireland will be his lack of understanding or caring for this place — encapsulated within his government's decisions on the Brexit withdrawal agreement, the sacking of Julian Smith, that unthinking approach to legacy and the foundations of devolution and Stormont again damaged. In recent years, the internal turmoil within the Conservative Party and the DUP has created both a sense of chaos and crisis — a loss of direction.

How do we fix what is broken? By going back to what worked and what works. Being honest about the past and the future and recreating the conversations and relationships will put things back on track. All of this will take time. Post-Johnson does not necessarily mean that things will improve — certainly not immediately or quickly. The internal machinations of the Conservative Party will take their own time to play out. In all of that, England's politics and interests rank above everything else — certainly above Northern Ireland. Yet, the DUP holds on to that party as its best hope of protecting and saving the union. Both are married to the Brexit project, if not all of its detail.

For the DUP, the price of Brexit has been the end of the unionist majority at Stormont and, in turn, losing the majority of NI seats in Westminster. Today, Sinn Fein is the largest party in the North — and, consistently in the polls, the lead party across the border.

Not just a story of orange and green

Within that post-Brexit electoral trend, another main development is the growth of the designation of 'other' as a significant third pillar within our politics. So, the Northern Ireland story is no longer just about 'orange' and 'green'. Alliance leader Naomi Long won a seat in the 2019 European Elections. Months later, Stephen Farry became an MP when winning North Down in the UK General Election, and, in 2022, Alliance more than doubled its representation at Stormont. Why is this important? Because the future of Northern Ireland cannot now be reduced to this tug-of-war between its

major tribes. Neither orange nor green has the numbers to win a border poll. The mood and mind of those within that frame of 'other' — their voices and votes — will determine the future. They hold the balance of decision, which is part of the fallout of Brexit that is often ignored: How it has changed and *is* changing the politics here. The old certainties are now gone, the future much less predictable. And unionists fear losing something more in the peace — losing the union. The sea border turned the Northern Ireland centenary year into a crisis. Some began to think aloud about an inevitable collision — that of 'union' versus 'unity'.

This is what I meant earlier about having to wait for a border poll — however long it will take to get to that point, wait until then to get a proper assessment of our long-term prospects for peace. That change in the 1990s — the ceasefires and the political agreement — represented a significant achievement but was not a full stop; it was the waiting room before the next challenge. That next challenge will be in the louder debate about a 'New Ireland'. It is now a mainstream conversation; we hear and read about it most days. None of that says a border poll will deliver unity, but it says that a match will have to play out. Firstly, you must create the pitch — meaning that you need your answers on both sides of the argument before being asked the questions — the arguments for the union *and* unity. When we look at the chaos within the politics of now — the post-Brexit turmoil — it is hard to find the leadership needed to shape and manage these subsequent conversations. So, how do you shift the focus from politics to people and the issues, create the stage, and ensure a place for every voice and opinion?

We are sparring with this question in the here and now, raising its possibility. We have no idea of the real support on each side of the argument, and we won't know until there is a timetable, a clear indication of a date for such a poll. That is when the energised and focused electorate will want to hear the thought-through answers on the issues that matter. Properly researched expert analysis and not words on the side of a bus as was the case with Brexit. A border poll is not just about flags and votes. For many, it will be the fine detail on education, health, pensions, economic viability, the transition, those questions about identity and culture and the political framework of any 'New Ireland'. How ready are we for that moment? 1998 was our new beginning — not the end. This more difficult moment has always been there in the background. Northern Ireland is not just about unionist demands and needs but the different aspirations of others.

What if the *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* had been fully implemented – in spirit and meaning – in all its parts? What if we had seriously engaged with the past issues and tried to address them? Might that have been our ‘New Ireland’? Post-1998, we have watched the endless negotiation of peace. There is much that has not happened. We talk about ‘new policing’, yet young officers joining from the nationalist community still have to live elsewhere – outside the areas where they grew up. There is nothing new about that. Nor does a ‘new’ MI5 Headquarters at Palace Barracks fit the script of a ‘new beginning’. Our ‘new politics’ has never really had time to find its feet. The brokenness we see so often in a dysfunctional Stormont and long periods without government. And can you have a ‘new peace’ with the past so close to us and, as yet, unaddressed? The ‘wars’ are not over if people do not have peace of mind.

What I have just outlined is only part of the story. I have heard those engaged in the conflict years learn a second language — turn a bend into the words of peace. I have listened to people who once fought in opposing trenches speak in the same rooms. I watched those relationships develop. And, in events 15 years ago, I witnessed what I believed was the real beginning of our peace, after the sudden death of the loyalist politician David Ervine when Gerry Adams crossed the Belfast lines from west to east to attend his funeral. Months later, we had the once unthinkable executive of Paisley and McGuinness. Sinn Fein endorsed the policing arrangements in the *Patten Reform* report. But, then, as in 1994 and 1998, we paused. Lost the momentum of peace; slowed it down, watching our politics break again and again. Too many of the organisations that were part of the ‘wars’ are still out there in some structural form — some of them much too obvious and present. It is part of why the past is still so loud. Gerry Adams could not step onto the Newtownards Road today. Circumstances and the mood have changed. Paisley and McGuinness are no longer with us. Nor is Hume. That rewind button I referenced earlier has been pressed, taking us back into old arguments. But, perhaps, the genuine concern is not the fallout of Brexit in the here-and-now but rather the conversation we still have to have and the decision that still has to be made. This issue I describe as ‘union’ versus ‘unity’.

We need outside help

Can you have working politics and a working peace while in this waiting room — this place of uncertainty, of fear, and at a time when politics in London is in such turmoil and so self-focused? Perhaps the best we can do is steady the ship — do the bits we can while we wait for the bits that still have to be done. That bigger conversation is the next step beyond the *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement*. In all that Northern Ireland has achieved since the 1990s, we have needed international or outside help — with politics, policing, and arms decommissioning. The next challenges are even more difficult — those questions of our past and future. We cannot do this ourselves. I have often said that we are too small to do this alone, too emotionally attached to those conflict years. They are stitched into the fabric of this place, lost in our thinking of what happened and why.

Once more, we need outside help. You cannot build a ‘New Northern Ireland’ or a ‘New Ireland’ on top of the graves of an unanswered past. We first need an internationally chaired and shaped legacy process — the ‘war and peace’ analysis of 50 years written with pens free of emotional ink. The working out of: how we deliver the full information to families; practical help; and how we create some shared place of remembering within which all can tell their stories — the different and many truths. That will have to be imagined from outside of politics. The exhibition *Silent Testimony* by the acclaimed artist Colin Davidson proves his ability to deliver something that might work. Without that process, we are still at war — not in a place to speak of something ‘new’. Can we have policing in which those who join can continue to live in their communities? And politics needs the unanswered question lifted from its shoulders — that choice and decision of ‘union’ or ‘unity’.

All of this requires trust, relationships, leadership and vision. It needs a plan that will take us out of the chaos now.