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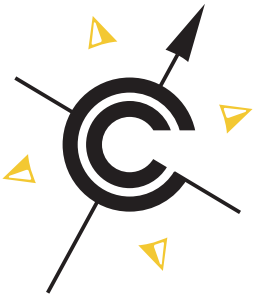

Centre for
Cross Border Studies

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Foreword

Peter Osborne

Chairperson, Centre for Cross Border Studies

It has been said that the hardest thing in life is to know which bridge to burn and which to cross.

That's not true. The hardest thing may be about judging when a bridge is to be crossed, not whether. The least understood thing may be about why it's important to put out the fires lit by others so that the bridges remain intact.

Building bridges and crossing them are good things, always.

We don't always realise how much progress we have made in this place. A summer virtually free of inter-community tension may not have been believed possible in the 1990s yet here we are, almost taking it for granted.

As we look back at what got us here, there may be no single magic solution. It may be that there has been a lot of plain hard work, especially from within civil society. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things, showing courage and passion, and a determination not to stop.

Those are the stories of this Journal. They are the stories of crossing bridges to see new prisms and new horizons, to embrace new ideas and new ways of thinking. They are stories of respecting the past, accepting other perspectives but moving forward in the context of mutual interest and mutual benefit.

They are stories of people who realised that when walls are put up between peoples for protection, they can quickly become barriers to personal and community growth.

Much of this work was undertaken quietly and little recognition was given then or now to the pioneers. As time passes new generations with little experience of life in those dark days of conflict will build their own bridges from the foundations laid by others. That is how it should be, so long as this hard-won peace isn't taken for granted and undermined by complacency or disinterest.

So, let's continue to build and cross bridges. Let's keep moving forward one step at a time, building those relationships that are so important North-South and East-West.

We want to acknowledge and thank all funders and supporters who day and daily help the Centre for Cross Border Studies do its work supporting and facilitating cross border engagement. That especially includes the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Reconciliation Fund, but many others recognised by us in other ways.

The Centre operates with a small but dedicated staff team who demonstrate their commitment and skills continually and achieve results beyond their number. While some team members move on to other things we wish them luck and hope that other organisations will benefit from their knowledge and talent.

New, equally skilled people will join the organisation and pick up the work where it has been left. The Board is grateful for the wisdom and leadership of its Director and the top team and constantly marvels at their productivity year on year.

We keep going, motivated by the need that still exists, excited by the prospects that continue to arise, and spurred on by the support of good people who understand.

At the heart of relationship lie values such as respect and empathy, and an understanding of the need to take responsibility for one's own role.

We are halfway through a 50 year plus peace process. The Centre for Cross Border Studies in promoting mutual interest and mutual benefit understands its role to build bridges, not barriers.

We hope people from all backgrounds and traditions throughout these islands will be part of that journey.

Introduction

Dr Anthony Soares

Director, Centre for Cross Border Studies

The 2023 edition of *The Journal of Cross Border Studies in Ireland* coincided with the year the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. There were many events marking this milestone, and the Centre for Cross Border Studies – as a child of the 1998 Agreement – did not want to let this moment pass without attempting in some small way to recognise its significance.

One of the ways we did this was to work in collaboration with the author and former BBC journalist, Brian Rowan, to organise a series of events entitled "25 pieces". Shaped by a selection from Brian's remarkable personal archive, the focus of these events was to shine a light on the informal and often very difficult conversations that took place in the years preceding the multi-party talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement, as well as the difficulties faced in implementing core aspects of what had been agreed.

This year's edition of *The Journal of Cross Border Studies in Ireland* sets out to perform a similar function. It, too, focuses on what was done in the years before 1998 that would help shape the context for the Good Friday Agreement. However, it is civil society that largely takes centre-stage here, particularly in terms of cross-border relations that were being built up prior to the Agreement. Arguably, the role civil society played was largely sidelined during this 25th anniversary year, especially at the more high-profile events where it was the political developments and manoeuvring that dominated. Moreover, while the conversations that took place between political leaders in London, Belfast and Dublin featured strongly, little attention was paid to the cross-border relations that were being made and maintained by civic society organisations even during the darkest days of the conflict that the Good Friday Agreement sought to bring to a definitive end. The contributions to this year's *Journal* seek to address this imbalance.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the articles and interviews contained in this edition show that the cross-border roads to and from the 1998 Agreement have not always been smooth, nor has the journey necessarily been completed. Indeed, in the opening article Quintin Oliver recalls the death threats and criticism he received in 1991, when he was the director of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), for having accepted his appointment by the Irish President, Mary Robinson, to join her Council of State. However, while Quintin recognises how embryonic cross-border collaboration between civic society organisations during the period of the troubles 'mushroomed' in the run-up to and following the ceasefires, supported by the EU's development of funding programmes, including PEACE, he is nevertheless critical of how far North-South cooperation has been embedded:

> [O]ne would not conclude that exponential growth occurred, innovation was rampant, mergers were frequent, new structures were developed, and a healthy, robust North-South civil society infrastructure was embedded. It has not.

This is not to suggest that nothing has been happening on a North-South front, but rather how much more could have been done and achieved if in the 1998 Agreement process there had been 'formal engagement between the talks' negotiators as an institution in its own right, and outside organisations'. The fact that this did not take place represents, in Quintin's view, 'an anomaly now unthinkable in any other peace process negotiations across the globe'. This marginalisation of civic society, symbolised by the 'stillborn' nature of the short-lived nature of the Northern Ireland Civic Forum and the never established all-island consultative forum is, according to Quintin, also apparent in how the institutions created under Strands 2 and 3 of the Agreement have been resistant to civic society input.

In the second article in the 2023 edition of *The Journal of Cross Border Studies in Ireland* Ruth Taillon, former Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, also considers the marginalisation of civic society's contribution to the peace process and resistance to its full involvement in decision-making. She sees this reflected in how the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement was marked:

> [T]he 25th anniversary events would appear to confirm a conceptual hierarchy of peace process 'players'. At the top are the 'peacemakers', many of whom are household names; at the bottom are the generally anonymous 'peacebuilders,' now largely written out of the script.

Ruth's article offers concrete examples of how 'civil society groups and individuals came together, […] attempting to overcome the structural, relational and cultural contradictions that lie at the root of conflict, whose efforts underpinned the processes of peacemaking and peacekeeping on this island'. Her examples include cross-border efforts, such as the PEACE I Consultative Forum, detailing how in the years preceding the Good Friday Agreement civic society often struggled to have their views taken onboard by policymakers.

The value of working collaboratively on a North-South and East-West basis in a way that counteracts the impulse to regard Northern Ireland as a 'place apart' is clearly articulated in Martin O'Brien's contribution. Recalling his role as Director of the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ), Martin notes how a series of planning reviews in 1991 led to a significant change in [CAJ's] approach and the development of an intentional and sustained effort to influence international opinion underpinned by a strong North-South, East-West approach'. CAJ's move to work with counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, as well as with the trade union movement (whose importance is recognised by other contributors to this *Journal*) was in part a recognition that efforts based only on Northern Ireland could be easily ignored. But it was also an acknowledgement that 'developments or problems in one part of the two islands had consequences for all the other parts', and that 'The goal should be to raise the bar for human rights protections across all jurisdictions rather than to see governments copying the worst approaches adopted in one place or another'. Crucially, although Martin notes the Good Friday Agreement may not have met all of their expectations, the results of CAJ's North-South and East-West and wider international collaborative efforts 'made their way into the final text of the *1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement*'.

The fourth article in the 2023 edition of *The Journal of Cross Border Studies in Ireland* is by Michael D'Arcy, a Senior Research Associate with the Centre for Cross Border Studies. His contribution focuses on the business community and on how cross-border and all-island economic activity was and continues to be an essential element in providing the prosperity that will help secure

the peace and reconciliation process. His contribution pays tribute to those businesses who persevered in operating on a cross-border basis even in the most challenging circumstances:

> In the late 1960s, cross-border businesses were put under enormous additional strain by the outbreak of the Troubles. The businessmen and women who kept going during that long, difficult period are also among the 'unsung heroes' of that time. Most had been working 'below the radar' and across the border before the Troubles began. All shared a necessary and admirable personal determination to 'keep going' and continue working through it all to maintain their business and the employment it provided.

These were the businesses, to be followed by others, who were in a position to take advantage of the opportunities presented by, in the first instance, the creation of the EU's Single Market, and then by the emerging peace process that culminated in the Good Friday Agreement. Michael notes, however, that notwithstanding the paramilitary ceasefires, 'it still took imagination, determination and personal investment for their efforts to succeed'.

As a native of Enniskillen and having spent four decades as a journalist with the *Impartial Reporter*, Denzil McDaniel's article brings into sharp focus life in the border region. Recalling the bombings, shootings and closing of border crossings that made cross-border cooperation difficult in the 1970s and 80s, Denzil quotes Aideen McGinley's reflection of how nevertheless "people just got on with it." Importantly, in terms of cross-border cooperation, he states: 'In the context of the troubled backdrop of the 1990s, the courage of officials and other visionary people who defied the odds to imagine the advantages of links across borders, whether physically geographical or in hearts and minds, should not be underestimated'. Among those 'visionary people' Denzil highlights are local community leaders who, even before the Good Friday Agreement, 'were working on ways to initiate projects to improve everyday lives, whether economic-based or focused on health cooperation, tourism or arts and culture'. He also pays recognition to the work of councillors and officials in the central border region local authorities which, irrespective of differing political allegiances, came together to form the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN).

The first of three interviews included in this year's *Journal* is with Ailbhe Smyth, an activist on feminist and LGBTQ issues and founding head of Women's Studies at University College Dublin, where she lectured for many

years. In a wide-ranging conversation, Ailbhe provides some frank insights into the challenges of finding common cause on a cross-border basis. Indeed, early in the interview she makes the following observation:

> I think in Ireland over my lifetime one of the great challenges has been to make those kinds of semi and informal relationships work, North and South. I haven't cracked it by a longshot.

But later, she goes on to stress the importance of continuing to strive for those cross-border relations:

> You know, I think we have to speak more about those complex lives that we have, that refuse to acknowledge the rigidity of borders. I certainly spent a great deal of my adult life, from my twenties onwards, negotiating those borders one way and another. Whether they're caused by the depths of history or by Brexit or whatever they're caused by. That we have to never, never, never give up. We always have to go on negotiating and pulling them apart and showing how permeable they are. That they are never insurmountable.

Among the challenges Ailbhe refers to when reflecting on the North-South academic conversations and relations she developed from the 1980s onwards was the 'difference in terms of speeds and rhythms between the South and the North', which shaped the differing contexts for women in the two jurisdictions. This difference in speeds and rhythms also affected North-South activism on feminist and LGBTQ issues. Nevertheless, while recognising and offering an in-depth analysis of the challenges, Ailbhe recognises the essential value of North-South cooperation, and expresses the hope that it will continue: 'I think that there's good leadership in the movements North and South, and I think that they are coming together as much as they possibly can, and that that will continue to grow and strengthen'.

The work of rural women's organisations in the border region is the focus of Amandine Blancquaert's article, and of the interview with Patricia Buckley and Eileen Stuttard that follows it (and from which Amandine's article quotes extensively). In fact, Amandine explores the establishment and evolution in South Armagh of Women on Rural Development (WORD), placing it within the wider context of socioeconomic community development work undertaken by women's organisations in the border region. While the rurality and peripherality of much of the border region has led to significant challenges in terms of deprivation, the South Armagh area in particular

suffered during the period of the troubles. As Amandine notes in her article, and Patricia and Eileen – both of them responsible for the creation of WORD – recall in their interview, the intense activity of paramilitaries and security forces in the area had given it a bad reputation ("bandit country"), undermining efforts to tackle deprivation that disproportionately impacted women. 'Since its creation in 1987', as Amandine sets out, 'Women on Rural Development sought to promote the region's strengths, while making sure that the voices of rural women in the locality were heard and acted upon'. However, two issues are worthy of highlighting here: the informal nature of the cross-border dimensions of the work, and how the wider value of the local activity undertaken by women's organisations needs to be recognised.

The two concluding contributions to the 2023 edition of *The Journal of Cross Border Studies in Ireland* come from a slightly different perspective. Caitríona Mullan's article is based on research undertaken on Irish state papers from the years preceding the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, and on her experience as a policy researcher for the Minister for Social Welfare during the period of the 'rainbow coalition' government between 1994 and 1997. Using direct evidence from government documents, Caitríona shows how even before the Agreement there were officials in both administrations on the island of Ireland, as well as politicians, committed to strengthening North-South cooperation, conscious of the opportunities presented by the UK and Ireland's joint membership of the European Union and, later, by the initial moves towards peace. She states:

> From the papers reviewed, the scope of intellectual capital for cross-border cooperation within the two administrative systems on the island went well beyond the sphere of political diplomacy and was a significant capability and asset within a range of major areas of domestic public administration and related policy-making.

The activity at official level was not being undertaken in isolation. As Caitríona remarks, 'happening in parallel to official efforts pre-1998 were countless efforts in civil society north and south to nurture and support the conditions in which people eventually embraced the spirit of the *Agreement* and gave it their assent'.

Bringing this edition of *The Journal of Cross Border Studies in Ireland* to a close is an interview with Rory O'Hanlon. Raised and having worked for parts of his professional life as a GP in the border region, Rory also served as a political representative both at local administrative level (Monaghan County

Council) and in the Dáil, holding a number of senior posts including as Minister for Health from 1987 to 1991. The conversation with Rory reveals a complex interplay between the experience of living in the border region during turbulent times (not just the period of the troubles, but also the second World War and the IRA's border campaign from the mid 1950s to early 1960s). His reflections recall the simultaneous experience of communities in the border region facing the horrors of conflict and of trying nevertheless to continue their cross-border lives, moving across their "hinterland" that does not confine itself to one or other jurisdiction. Although considering what was done before the Good Friday Agreement Rory suggests that 'the ordinary people doing their ordinary work made a greater contribution to reconciliation than a terrible lot of the politicians', he nevertheless offers concrete examples of how political representatives from North and South were often able to cooperate on practical matters that were seen to be of mutual benefit. However, what he also points to is how that ability to cooperate is dependent on the establishment and maintenance of good relations between them, which is not always seen as a priority.

It is hoped that this edition of *The Journal of Cross Border Studies in Ireland* is, in some small way, able to serve as an acknowledgement of the tireless work done by civic society as well as officials and political representatives in preparing the ground for the Good Friday Agreement, and especially for what it means in terms of relations within and across these islands. Whatever political obstacles may have arisen in relation to the functioning of the institutions in Northern Ireland (which are not functioning at the time of writing), it is important to recognise that North-South and East-West cooperation and relations continue to be maintained. As Caitríona Mullan asserts in her article:

> A rarely-advertised fact is that while the political institutions of strand one stand still, a momentum of cross-party consensus-based political cooperation has continued undisrupted at the local government/regional cross-border level since the 1990s and allowed the border region and Northern Ireland to withstand the shock and avert the worst of the potential economic and social disruption of both a global pandemic and the Brexit process.

As ever, the Centre for Cross Border Studies, in collaboration with others across these islands, will continue to work to fulfil the aspirations contained within the Good Friday Agreement.

Civil Society's Bottom-Up Contributions to Cross-Border Interactions – To What End?

Quintin Oliver

***Quintin Oliver**, born in Belfast, educated at St Andrews University, worked as Director of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) in the fifteen years before the Belfast Good Friday Agreement and for Stratagem NI, his own public policy and lobbying agency for twenty years after.*

He served on President Mary Robinson's Council of State and many cross-border and European initiatives, including as President of the European Anti-Poverty Network. He undertakes conflict resolution work for Stratagem International and chairs the Consultation Institute.

In 1991 I was invited by the then newly and unexpectedly elected President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, to join her Council of State[1] as one of her seven personal nominees, the others being *ex officio* – current and former Taoisigh, presidents, justices and so on; the cream of the Irish establishment.

From her perspective, she wanted to make a northern appointment, and my civil society status (I was then director of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)), relative youth (then 35) and perceived Protestant background all presumably ticked the right boxes.

For me, the consequences were less benign – a Loyalist death threat, hostility from Unionism for fraternising with the Irish state, suspicion from Republicans for closeness to a 'liberal' incumbent president, and a *froideur* from my mainly middle-class Unionist family, who could not fathom why I would want to support the institutions of a 'foreign' country; they saw it as a betrayal.

Logistically, Council of State membership seemed to stretch cross-border cooperation; papers had to be couriered to the border by gardaí and transferred to the then Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) for personal delivery (email was not then in wide usage and the cross-border post too unreliable even in the 1990s apparently).

Understandably, heavy security and protocols on each side encumbered each visit north by the president. I recall almost being wrestled to the ground by Secretary of State and MP Peter Brooke's security detail as I arrived once to greet the president's plane at Belfast City Airport since the northern procedures had no box to accommodate a northern Council of State member in the welcoming party.

As an aside, there were also logistical challenges gaining entry to Áras an Uachtaráin[2] as either a cyclist or pedestrian – neither would trigger the bell to the guardhouse to be buzzed through!

North-South doldrums begin to sense wind in the sails

Meanwhile, day-to-day cross-border cooperation was resting in the doldrums, operating as usual for cross-border workers in each direction, for business and trade, for sporting and cultural organisations, women's groups, and several study visits, exchanges and proto-partnerships amongst adventurous youth and other civil society groups. However, the transactional barriers of currency differentials, VAT regimes, legal systems and cultural obstacles dampened much potential activity, underneath the ever-present and ominous cloud of the Troubles, with its pernicious violence and accompanying chill factors all round.

In my role at NICVA,[3] we adopted an avowedly North-South, East-West perspective; we knew that our members were roughly 60% local and indigenous to Northern Ireland, 25% branches of UK organisations and 15% affiliated to all-island bodies; we also wanted to learn, share and build productive partnerships. So, for example, we:

- Co-wrote with the then Equality Authority Ireland (EA), later controversially merged with the new Human Rights Commission,[4] an analysis of equality rights on each side of the border, in the then uncontested European context, with recommendations for alignment and mutual improvement;

- Collaborated closely with the then Combat Poverty Agency (CPA)[5] on similar research and comparative analyses; and with the National Social Service Board (NSSB),[6] our nearest counterpart, on how civil society could flourish in each jurisdiction and advance better outcomes for citizens;
- Promoted joint conferences, seminars and exchanges;
- Supported funding applications to the EU peace programmes, Interreg and the LEADER rural development programme;
- Liaised seamlessly with southern counterparts in emerging European networks, such as the European Anti-Poverty Network,[7] the European Women's Lobby,[8] EuroCaso[9] and many others, to ensure appropriate alignments and interactions across the island.

For many, this was a new prism to view society in the south. Beyond sporting and cultural outings, some had little reason to venture south; some found it challenging – threatening even – because of perceived differences and a sense of wariness about or even hostility to northerners. Mutual ignorance was indeed corrosive, exacerbated, of course, by the ever-present reality of looming and actual violence caused by the armed conflict.

However, when taken to the European level, many were surprised at how beneficial it became to come from the island of Ireland. Ireland was seen as neutral between the European north and south, a small member state, neutral in global terms too, effective as networkers across the EU and likeable both as diplomats and as activists. The UK, in contrast, was a large member state, a big player, aligned, Eurosceptic in parts, a stickler for the rule of law and sound process, and slightly distant and aloof. If one could play these assets well, pivoting between them, allying when appropriate and diverging where necessary, one could punch well above one's solo weight.

Impressed by the pre-existing structures and operating methodologies of bodies such as the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU),[10] the National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI),[11] the great and oft-quoted pre-partition survivor, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI),[12] the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA),[13] several faith organisations (e.g. Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church of Ireland, Quakers in Ireland),[14] and later arrival set up for this very existential purpose, Cooperation North[15] (latterly Cooperation Ireland). Bodies that represented deeply felt and natural national allegiances, historical anomalies or customs and practices; others

consciously offered North-South and East-West parallel structures[16] and opportunities for members and beneficiaries. Many pre-figured the *1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement*'s eventual structures.

In parallel, in the early 90s, former civil servant, economist and banker Sir George Quigley[17] was developing his ideas about the Dublin-Belfast or North-South economic corridor, with a blindingly simple proposition:

> The island's potential will not be realised unless there develops between Belfast and Dublin the normal economic and business interaction which one would expect to see between cities only 100 miles apart. And it genuinely needs to be an economic corridor and not simply a tunnel, with nothing happening in the space between the two cities.

This compelling assertion at once electrified the debate, always dogged by fear and suspicion about underlying political or constitutional motives. It won early cross-party political support, business excitement and community buy-in. The Ibec/CBI NI Joint Business Council (JBC),[18] established in 1993, flourished after that; and many non-business groups found the idea sufficiently non-political and practical to muster widespread backing as 'the right thing to do' in the moment. It gave a purpose and a sense of change-making potential that could stimulate and accompany the political process of peace, underpinned by economic development, growth and opportunity.[19]

Feeding frenzy

Politically, as the ceasefires neared and a formal talks process lurched into view (with various accompanying all-island forums and networks), cross-border activities mushroomed. Every civil society organisation seemed to want a piece of the action, cultivating relationships, building alliances, developing memorandums of understanding, protocols, joint agreements and all-island ("all-Ireland" was still frowned upon!) strategies and organisational outworkings.

Accompanying these organic developments, the EU was developing various initiatives through the structural funds directly or through special programmes such as the first PEACE Programme (known as the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland),[20] Interreg[21] and LEADER.[22] The International Fund for Ireland (IFI)[23] – although

a veteran of ten years by then – since its birth after the *Anglo-Irish Agreement* of 1985,[24] also played a part in stimulating and supporting a raft of cross-border projects, albeit more in the economic and business domain, than in the social field.

As the 1996 elections to the Northern Ireland Forum[25] presaged a new formalisation of the peace process, dozens of groups dusted down their asks and manifestoes for reform. Strangely, however, despite a flourishing and well-resourced third sector, a free and enquiring media, freedom of cross-border movement, and relatively constructive channels of communication between civil society and both governments and political parties, engagement with the forum was modest; it was probably still seen as 'too political', and its agenda was unremittingly political, overtly sectarian, misogynist, and mostly backwards-looking. After all, it was only a prelude, a device to move towards the real talks process.

Nevertheless, not much changed when the process graduated into the Castle Buildings Talks, a classic example of an élite accommodation between two governments, by the then eight consenting political parties, all egged on and supported by the US administration (who supplied Senator George J. Mitchell[26] to chair the talks, a skilled negotiation team, and massive public political encouragement through President Clinton) and the European Union, to which both countries belonged, at that moment harmoniously. It offered significant financial aid through its mainstream and special funding programmes and a convening space for governments 'in the margins' of EU meetings and civil society organisations eager to learn and share informally.

The waters were muddied perhaps by the irregular status of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC),[27] both a political party elected in its own right but also effectively a civil society creation with deep roots back into the women's movement itself, the community and voluntary sector, the trade union movement and academia. So, of course, it was open to external ideas, advocacy and listening (in a way in which the mainstream parties then seemed incapable).

The point stands – there was no formal engagement between the talks' negotiators as an institution in its own right, and outside organisations, an anomaly now unthinkable in any other peace process negotiations across the globe. There are often roles for women through an integral consultative function (the Geneva Talks on Syria being a case in point[28] and also the

Havana-based Colombian talks with FARC[29] – whose eventual gender chapter is amongst the world's best),[30] for business, unions, faith groups and others; often such external 'experts by experience' can quickly double-check more outer lying suggestions, but also to offer appropriate checks and balances, expert inputs, and guidance. Despite the risks of breaches of confidentiality, the substantial added value is widely recognised, and research shows implementation of any resulting peace agreement is more effective, swifter and sustained.[31]

Of course, some civil society concerns and solutions are to be found embedded in the eventual text of the 1998 *Agreement*, from the primacy of victims, through commitments to integrated education, the importance of legacy questions, to the encouragement of women in public life, alongside equality and human rights promises. Still, it would be wrong to suggest that the *Agreement* is cutting-edge in these respects.

The institutional proposals for the incorporation of civil society into public and political life were twofold:

- A civic forum[32] to act as a consultative mechanism advising the First and Deputy First Ministers on social, economic and cultural issues;
- A cross-border consultative civic forum[33] (strand two, para 19).

Each enjoyed a slightly different genesis and coalition of backers as the final texts were negotiated and horse-traded late into the night before Good Friday 1998; each suffered the pangs of effectively being stillborn.

From organic growth to institutional torpor

The excitement of the 71.2% positive vote for the *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* in the May 1998 Referendum[34] and the parallel 94.4% endorsement in the south was palpable. People had voted for hope, for a non-violent future with power-sharing, parity of esteem, and the principle of consent, with all the accompanying 'frogs to be swallowed', such as prisoner release within two years, decommissioning of weapons commitments, and for some, police reform and what became known as 'terrorists in government'.

My recollection of that time was that civil society, especially the voluntary and community sector component, undertook an audible sigh of relief,

committed itself to support the political parties fulfil their new responsibilities and anticipated significant focus and delivery from the new institutions, for which we had worked so hard to see brought to life. There was anticipation and optimism, tinged with a pragmatic realism that this would not be overnight nirvana; peace needed to be worked at.

So, for example, the June 1998 elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly were planned to take place swiftly after the May referendum (only five weeks), lest things unravel, but because of the ambiguity around decommissioning of arms, with polar opposite Unionist/Nationalist stances, was not to convene until 30 November 1999. The North-South Ministerial Council[35] also had a delayed first outing in December 1999, which was marred by a rather triumphal display of two governments descending on Armagh City in convoys of limousines with outriders, not amenable to stimulate great public support about a lynchpin institution of the *Agreement.* Nor were its subsequent activities particularly transparent, with self-promoting press releases issued after each plenary and sectoral meeting, announcing some minister or other had achieved a goal. Notably, it was also dogged by endless political controversy over whether Unionists might exercise a boycott in pursuit of the resolution of some other dispute or not.

The British Irish Council (BIC),[36] despite its vast potential, both politically and administratively across these islands, never seems to have reached beyond the bland communiqué and photocall phase. Indeed, it resisted civil society input beyond hand-picked flagship projects, despite the crying need for action on many practical policy issues that crossed every border, especially after foot and mouth disease in 2001, the financial crash of 2008-09 and then again after the Brexit vote in 2016.

The opportunity to build a robust network of governmental and non-governmental actors, anxious to share best practices, learn from others' experiences and implement practical projects to improve well-being and deliver better outcomes for citizens has been squandered.

As to the two formal expressions of civil society engagement described above, neither was sustained. The Northern Ireland Civic Forum was almost strangled at birth[37] and swiftly abandoned by the then first minister and deputy first minister in 2002 amidst complaints of irrelevance, cost and unrepresentativeness. The North-South version, strand two, para 19 of the *Agreement*,[38] never flew formally at all, despite modest encouragement from

the southern government and three semi-formal seminars hosted at Farmleigh a decade on from 1998 with social partners (business, unions, third sector) and others, but with little outcome.

Therefore both significant institutional pieces of the *Agreement* infrastructure directly promoting and deploying civil society under strands one and two remain in abeyance; suggestions around hostility, or indeed lack of confidence amongst politicians about their status and ideas, may account for the cold-shoulder presented to both putative institutions from the north.[39] There was also a raft of other commitments to enshrine human rights and equality provisions, for example, to manage the complex questions of legacy, some of which remain outstanding.

Furthermore, none of the other institutions or structured processes under the *Agreement* appears to have developed any particular formal or semi-formal relationships with civil society representative bodies, including the North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC), the British Irish Council (BIC), the six formal North-South bodies[40] (with some honourable exceptions), the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly,[41] and others.

Exceptions to the above include the Institute of British-Irish Studies (IBIS), the Centre for Cross Border Studies, and various bilateral and multilateral networks and alliances. Although not mandated by the *Agreement,* Tourism Ireland[42] and the Institute for Public Health (IPH)[43] came into existence around the same time and established productive two-way lines of communication with various civil society partners.

This institutional malaise, exacerbated by political breakdowns and deep ideological differences across Unionism and Nationalism as the political structures and cultures bedded down, stalled the organic growth of cross-border interactions in the 2000s. There remained an apprehension in civil society, concern about efficiencies and political antennae twitched lest one side or the other would look less favourably at your group's intentions. The "*Emerald Curtain"* also hung across the island from the southern perspective, too, ignorant about the 'black north' and reluctant to enquire far less engage. Operating East-West across the UK seemed more 'natural' for some than branching out into North-South adventures, also evidenced, of course, by the historical imbalances of volumes (the predominance of UK 'parent' bodies, brands, franchises and orientation for those not indigenous or local to Northern Ireland alone).

This period of 2000-2016 should have seen an explosion of North-South activity, giving expression to George Quigley's economic analysis about untapped potential across the island's economy, now supported and encouraged by a political mandate from the people, with accompanying institutional structures; and there were some striking and bold examples:

- The South-North gas pipeline[44] project that brought natural gas to Coolkeeragh power station in Derry, a political decision in the north by Ulster Unionist Party Economy Minister Reg Empey MLA, against economic and civil service advice;
- The Single Electricity Market (SEM)[45] of Ireland, the first anywhere in the world across jurisdictional and currency boundaries;
- Children's cardiac surgery[46] for which Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) Health Minister Edwin Poots MLA agreed to cease Northern Ireland provision in favour of an all-island package;[47]
- Altnagelvin's North-West Cancer Centre,[48] partly funded by the Republic to provide services to those from Donegal as well as from the north;[49]
- Much of the health collaboration had been pre-figured by CAWT[50] (Cooperation and Working Together), established in 1992 under the Ballyconnell Agreement to promote health resource-sharing across four border counties;
- Similar examples exist in education[51] and transport, including the long-running A5 upgrade[52] and other infrastructure projects.[53]

Interestingly, the projects cited above recurred often as examples of note during a range of interviews conducted for this article with personnel across sectors; that may be of concern if they continually recur as the *only* positive examples that occur in respect of two decades of practice. Some other examples cited remain somewhat marginal or symbolic in the main.

For third-sector organisations, there were many pioneering initiatives by women's groups, rural groups (including rural women),[54] anti-poverty activists,[55] environmental groups[56] and equality specialists, sometimes bringing significant influence to bear on the relevant governments, as in the case of the role of women in peace and security under UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325[57] with the Irish government. And, of course, organisations such as Cooperation Ireland,[58] whose *raison d'etre* remains promoting and deepening cross-border interaction for peace.

Others saw and developed commercial and social enterprise opportunities across the island, such as Early Years,[59] Extern[60] and PraxisCare,[61] or Choice Housing,[62] in some cases building significant project infrastructure to offer services in their specialist domains and develop assets for the organisation concerned to deliver positive outcomes for current and future beneficiaries.

Nevertheless, one would not conclude that exponential growth occurred, innovation was rampant, mergers were frequent, new structures were developed, and a healthy, robust North-South civil society infrastructure was embedded. It has not.

External factors bite hard

At the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the financial crisis was particularly severe in the Republic of Ireland, with massive interventions from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and EU[63] required to ensure effective loans of c. €67 billion. The crisis dampened the political and public atmosphere and regenerated fears and suspicions of Irish fragility as a financial and political entity[64] dependent on European and international bailouts. There was palpable relief among Unionists that they could shelter under the more significant and deeper umbrella of UK resources to weather the storm.

2016 saw the cataclysmic impact of the Brexit referendum[65] on all concerned, not just the British part of the UK but both parts of Ireland and the EU, with extensive wider global ripples. Economically the outworkings of the changes are still being assessed, as effort[66] after effort[67] is made by the key actors to resolve the complex trading dilemmas arising from the UK (i.e. through Northern Ireland) having a land border with the EU, causing the choices between land and sea borders driving existential wedges between jurisdictions and also between political parties. At the time of writing, the impasse, exemplified by the DUP boycott of Stormont,[68] persists.

For most businesses, the impact has been onerous, with invidious choices about actual and perceived allegiances overlaid with increased administration and paperwork and the seemingly everlasting uncertainty of the context and regulatory framework within which they must operate. For some, it has presented an opportunity to supply into the EU single market or to resupply previous Great Britain-Northern Ireland exporters who have chosen not to service Northern Ireland now as a marginal market with extra

costs and undefined regulation. It is undoubtedly too early to tell where the jigsaw pieces may eventually land and the picture they will display.

The 2020 arrival of COVID-19 on the island provided further challenges that swiftly became divisive politically – whose protocols and regimes should Northern Ireland follow? Nationalists naturally gravitated towards Dublin, while Unionists simultaneously looked to London for guidance and support; arguments broke out, almost from day one, despite protestations – and agreement – that everyone, politicians especially, should be *following the science*. We have 50 shades of science, from orange to green and back again.

Who would have thought that children's access to their schools, the length and format of 'lockdowns', the use of face-coverings, attendance at funerals, the definition of 'essential' workers, subsidies to affected businesses – and many more – would quickly become politically defined and colour-tinged? The polar opposite observations from Unionist and Nationalist politicians at the UK Covid Inquiry[69] currently being played out in London hearings underline the point. Sadly, many suffered on account of those political failures.

In 2022, when Russia conducted its illegal invasion of Ukraine, the global implications were immediately apparent, from the energy crisis and cost spiral, the mass movement of refugees, including large numbers entering the UK and Ireland (including some inevitably caught confusingly between the two jurisdictional efforts in Northern Ireland), inflationary pressures, commodity shortages and allied obstacles. In Ireland, north and south, the humanitarian response was magnificent. However, some pointed up the inevitable hierarchy of refugee status[70] as Ukrainians seemed to be afforded special and enhanced treatment over pre-existing refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Intensified demands for a border poll to re-establish a unified, united, un-partitioned or agreed Ireland came against these four external factors (the financial crisis, Brexit, COVID-19 and now the Russia-Ukraine war). Nationalists sensed opportunity, and Unionists feared being bounced; others were intrigued or ambivalent in equal measure about the prospects of a long, drawn-out constitutional argument while the world seemed to be experiencing harsh and unusual pressures – and Northern Ireland itself was far from stable, reconciled, integrated and motoring on all cylinders for all citizens.

Strangely the formulation for a border poll had been ceded in strand one of the *Agreement* to the Northern Ireland Office Secretary of State[71] to decide only when s/he felt a majority would vote to leave the UK and join the Republic, an undefined but high bar to achieve. Comparing it to the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014, a purely political agreement between the UK and Scottish governments reached at Edinburgh[72] between Alex Salmond MSP, head of the Scottish government and David Cameron MP, head of the UK government, in October 2012, when polls certainly did not show a majority was likely to vote to leave the UK, albeit counterbalanced by a narrow majority of the Scottish Parliament thus indicating.

Sinn Féin must be smarting that their absence from strand one talks at Castle Buildings has bequeathed this additional hurdle – however to be defined – to leap.

It is also becoming more apparent that quite apart from the political perils of the unification debate,[73] the modalities[74] of running parallel or possibly sequential referendums on each side of the border generate dozens of critical questions to be defined, analysed and negotiated by the two governments, from campaign finance, through question-wording to implementation issues, but also with northern political representatives – currently absent without leave – and some of whom are profoundly reluctant to enter talks that could entertain their demise.

As so often, the noble aspirations of the *Agreement* a quarter of a century ago have not provided the firm foundational platform so many expected; political malaise, other political and economic distractions, the diversion of the two sponsoring governments and the US, not to mention the no longer neutral presence of the EU, to which only one state still adheres, have conspired to create a miasma of muddle.

There is also a weariness in civil society, extending to burnout in many instances, especially amongst those who have all played their part over the decades since the 1990s and are facing enormous internal pressures organisationally (e.g. governance, funding, priorities, diversity, inflation) and immense personal pressures too (e.g. cost of living, fuel prices, post-COVID-19 adjustment).

So, what is to be done?

In civil society discourse, we are optimistic, agile, flexible, swift and energetic; here are five key recommendations:

1. **Strategy:** The *Agreement* creates a framework, but without a strategy, for implementation or prioritisation; say, to achieve reconciliation in the north or enhanced collaboration with the south; the Irish government's Shared Island Initiative[75] is but a modest start from one partner alone.
2. **Guarantors:** The two governments, the US and the EU (now hampered understandably by Brexit), when they work well together, provide leadership and drive. However, for nearly a decade since the Brexit vote, each has been distracted and almost missing in action (until external pressures have demanded urgent intervention).
3. **Leadership from the top:** The recent Presidents of Ireland, Robinson, McAleese, and Higgins, have each played a positive part by reaching out to the north, opening up Áras an Uachtaráin to visitors and extending the 'hand of friendship' (but without a northern counterpart); likewise Taoisigh and Tánaisti, ministers and institutional leaders (but again with a bifurcated northern polity, it can be hard to generate reciprocity). More is required to 'normalise' day-to-day interaction.
4. **Investment:** Strategic investment in capacity-building, training, mentoring and coaching, networks, and coalition-building will each pay dividends in embedding long-term sustainability.
5. **Institutions:** Focusing on strengthening institutions, networks and alliances, rather than just people-to-people exchanges, will lead to a more substantial and robust community infrastructure.

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Laying the Foundations for Peace

Ruth Taillon

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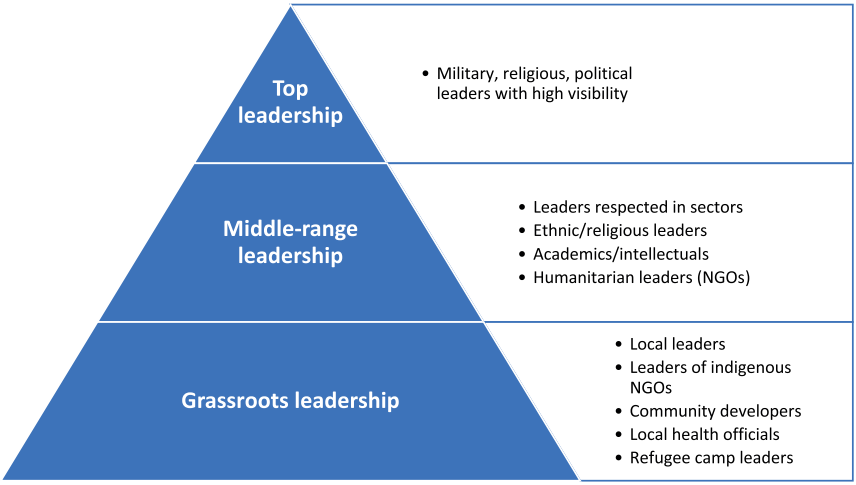
The flurry of plays, banquets, seminars, webinars and documentaries commemorating and celebrating the 25th anniversary of the *1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* this year generally had one thing in common. They tended to highlight the contributions of those individuals who were 'at the table' and directly involved in negotiating the *Agreement*. We had revelations and reminders about the various exchanges – in the public domain or in secret – that led to the choreography of talks, ceasefires, and eventually elections that determined what Northern Ireland politicians would be granted seats at the table, ultimately culminating in the referenda north and south.

The contributions of the thousands of ordinary women and men working in their communities – who may or may not have thought of themselves as 'peacebuilders' – have largely been lost in this narrative. But without them, our peace process and our precious, yet less than perfect, *Agreement* would never have been.

In the past quarter-century, many academic careers have been built upon dissecting and analysing conflicts worldwide, not least in the Irish context.

John Paul Lederach was one theorist whose work had considerable resonance among community-based practitioners here. The Lederach Pyramid below represents a series of interdependent layers emphasising a mass movement of civil society and grassroots organisations. Simultaneously the activities of top- and middle-level leaderships are taking place.[1]



Lederach defined peacebuilding as the attempt to overcome the structural, relational and cultural contradictions at the root of conflict to underpin peacemaking and peacekeeping processes. Peacebuilding aims to address both the causes and effects of conflict. It is a process of transforming from a society characterised by conflict and division to one based on equality and justice.[2]

Lederach's model incorporates political developments in conjunction with initiatives undertaken by civil society. Those at the grassroots have often experienced the conflict most intensely. Therefore, local leadership is most suitable for facilitating community-led peacebuilding efforts. The 'top-down' approach is ineffective in creating a sustainable, peaceful society.[3]

A small industry of conflict resolution theorists has developed their analyses of multi-track diplomacy with similar pyramids, not always with Lederach's emphasis on the importance of community-led initiatives. Readers will be relieved that I will not rehearse these theories further here. Nevertheless, the 25th anniversary events would appear to confirm a conceptual hierarchy

of peace process 'players'. At the top are the 'peacemakers', many of whom are household names; at the bottom are the generally anonymous 'peacebuilders,' now largely written out of the script.

This does not diminish the exceptional impacts of the European Union's PEACE programmes (of which more below) and certain other funders that have supported grassroots peacebuilding initiatives. When the peace process has stalled, community-based peace projects have played a vital role in maintaining and developing relationships within and between communities. The PEACE programmes have supported community-based peacebuilding initiatives in a challenging political environment.

Perhaps the first shibboleth to slay is the 'bravery' of the politicians for their 'management' of their constituencies and 'delivering' the vote for peace and reconciliation. In truth, the people were then and are now frequently far in advance of the politicians who are meant to represent them. My purpose here is to highlight just a few of the community-led initiatives that helped to lay the foundations for what is now known as the peace process and, ultimately, the *Agreement*.

Women's Support Network

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, many, if not most, grassroots initiatives were framed as 'community development' rather than 'peace projects'. The conceptual framework was a social change based on equality and social justice, a rights-based approach, often resisting compliance with an externally-imposed 'good relations' agenda. Nevertheless, there was, in fact, considerable cross-community engagement and once funding began to flow, some 'back-to-back' projects were developed for mutual gain. However, alliances made based on genuine shared interests were the most effective.

A particular feature of the mid-to-late 1980s was the emergence of local women's centres alongside several issue-based women's organisations similar to those campaigning for women's rights and gender equality elsewhere.[4] The women's centres were different. While their ethos was unapologetically feminist, they were based in working-class neighbourhoods, generally areas that were among those most affected by the conflict and high on the indices of deprivation. As well as campaigning and advocacy, the centres offered services to local women such as information and advice, informal education (accredited courses generally came later), drop-in

facilities, personal support and counselling, always supported by childcare. The centres were a lifeline for many women, especially single parents and those isolated in their homes. They also provided some employment for local women. Their activities tended to be delivered with a patchwork of funding and a lot of volunteer effort. A limited amount of local government funding offered some stability and helped to reassure other funders.[5]

> *Within local communities, there was still a range of needs to be addressed by those women who were often balancing enforced single parenthood through the imprisonment of male partners and relatives, dealing with the trauma of bereavement or the care of the injured, seeking to prevent children from becoming caught up in the on-going violence; responding to community expectations and struggling to cope with inadequate incomes increasingly the target of UK conservative government cuts. Local self-help women's groups came together to discuss things and offer mutual support in the single identity areas where people lived, defined by 10-foot-high 'peace walls' in Belfast.*[6]

In 1989, Belfast City Council informed Falls Women's Centre and Shankill Women's Centre of grant reductions. Simultaneously, Ballybeen Women's Centre received news of funding cuts from Castlereagh Borough Council. The Falls Women's Centre is located in a predominantly Catholic/Nationalist/Republican area; the Shankill and Ballybeen Women's Centres are in predominantly Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist areas.

Ballybeen Women's Centre had previously surveyed the Ballybeen estate and, not surprisingly, identified high levels of deprivation and social need. The women proceeded to convene several public agencies to address some of the problems and successfully lobbied to have Making Belfast Work extended to Dundonald. Thus, these women who didn't know their place had already annoyed some local councillors, who had made no such efforts. The DUP-dominated council's wrath escalated when women from the Falls joined the Ballybeen women on a picket of the council, resulting in complicated relations between the centre and the council for a very long time.

The threatened funding cuts catalysed the establishment of the Women's Support Network (WSN), which gradually expanded to include a wide variety of women's projects and infrastructure groups in Northern Ireland.

Ireland's first woman president, Mary Robinson, was elected in 1990 and, in February 1991, invited the WSN to visit Áras An Uachtarán. The northern women ensured this was more than tea and a photo opportunity. They used the visit to inform the president of the needs of their communities and the challenges they faced.

The women's assertion that they were not a 'reconciliation group' took the president somewhat aback. When asked why they were so adamant, they said:

> *Because we're fed up with being supported as a reconciliation group but not as a women's group. In other words, they won't support us for what we're really about. They'll only fund us if we're a reconciliation group.*
>
> *Neither side wanted to be sanitised or cleaned up. The west Belfast women, in particular, wanted to be valued for their loyalty to their traditions as much as their involvement in cross-community activity.*
>
> *But I think they recognised … that they were part of a very advanced reconciliation … They didn't want to be homogenised; they wanted to maintain the difference and find strength in that difference, respect the difference*.[7]

The president visited Belfast in February 1992 at the invitation of WSN, "a coalition of women's organisations from the most disadvantaged areas, and from both traditions … at the Equality Commission offices in Belfast."[8] It was breaking new ground for the president, who 'informed' the Irish government she would be crossing the border but did not ask permission. The visit was the first working visit by an Irish president to any part of Northern Ireland.[9] Nigel Dodds, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) Lord Mayor, refused to meet her, and she was denied diplomatic security protection.[10]

The WSN returned to the Áras in 1992 to present a copy of their recently published study of Northern Ireland women's groups, *Grant-Aided…or Taken for Granted?* When a group of 200 from the same women's network came one beautiful summer's day, Mary remembers the sun streaming in the windows of the Áras drawing room–

> *… and everyone sitting on the floor and the fags being smoked and the very real sense of solidarity. At one stage, I left them, and I*

> *remember looking down from upstairs to the garden, and there was a wonderful interaction going on. I had a sense of dialogue expanding all the time. All I was doing was staying in touch with it and giving it that recognition and oxygen of support and respect.*[11]

Behind-the-scene communications continued between these visits, and the doors to the Áras were opened to many other northern community groups. Over time, the president made 18 visits to Northern Ireland but she would recall: "The most significant, certainly the most controversial, was my visit to Belfast in June 1993. … There was no ceasefire and no peace process at that stage, and the violence was escalating."[12] The famous handshake with Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams, took place during this visit.

> *I knew this was going to be difficult. Nobody was going into West Belfast, and nobody was meeting with Gerry Adams; … it was still illegal to broadcast his voice on radio or television. This community in west Belfast felt completely isolated … Yet it had a vibrant community; it was full of good people working hard to counter the lack of facilities and resources and the discrimination they suffered. That is what I wanted to honour.*[13]

"I will never forget," wrote Mary Robinson, "the palpable sense of excitement when I went into that community hall. …. Everyone was excited and knew that something had happened, some taboo had been broken." This ice-breaking exercise contributed to an evolving peace process, including secret British government/Sinn Féin contacts and the Adams/Hume/Reynolds dialogue. Later, there were other prestigious visits to west Belfast by Albert Reynolds, Bertie Ahern and Ron Brown, President Clinton's Commerce Secretary.[14]

Dialogue with WSN continued. The Windsor Women's Centre in the Loyalist village area in south Belfast invited President Robinson to visit in September 1996. During the visit, protesters picketed and shouted abuse: "Go home, Fenian bastard". The following day, the centre was fire-bombed, causing extensive damage. Over the next two months, the centre was attacked seven times, including three arson attacks and personal threats against the mainly local staff. Plans for an event involving members of women's groups from across Belfast, voluntary organisations and trade unions to show solidarity with the centre had to be called off after a counter-protest was planned by the group that had originally picketed the centre.[15] Today, Windsor Women's

Centre is still going strong, working within a community development framework to develop and promote equality of opportunity and champion practices and policies to better the lives of women and their families.

Clár Nua: The west Belfast community agenda

After the 1994 ceasefires, a coalition of eight 'umbrella' organisations for Nationalist West Belfast[16] came together to discuss their shared concern that the potential of the anticipated 'peace dividend' should be most effectively maximised to meet the real needs of the west Belfast community. An ambitious and intensive consultation over six weeks culminated in the Clár Nua conference in November 1994. Discussion papers were presented at ten policy workshops and – based on these discussions and later written submissions – the *Clár Nua Report* was published soon after. The strategy covered housing, human rights, economic development, language and culture, women, health, education and young people.

In her opening address to the conference, Eileen Howell, Director of Falls Community Council, said:

> *The time has come to end those processes through which others decided what was best for us. Gone are the days of mediation between policy decision-makers and the west Belfast community. This community demands a process which listens to us, which involves us, a process in which decisions are made with us, not for us.*[17]

Early in the new year, Clár Nua groups set out a plan to target power holders and influencers – the Northern Ireland Office, Making Belfast Work, Belfast City Council, Chambers of Commerce and all the political parties in both jurisdictions. The Taoiseach John Bruton and President Robinson would receive the report, and a presentation was made to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.

In March, Clár Nua sent a submission to the European Commission regarding the anticipated EU Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland (PEACE I). This document summarised Clár Nua's background and the principles the conference agreed upon.

> *We believe that there now exists the momentum to initiate real change so that the disadvantage and political conflict of the past will*

> *no longer be in evidence. If this change is to be realised, then the universal principles of equality, equity and parity of esteem must be recognised and implemented. This will require a reconstruction framework embracing economic justice and the political, social, cultural and human rights of our community. Clár Nua believes that real and effective reconstruction can only be achieved with the full participation of our community at all levels. … We appeal to the European Commission and the European Parliament to ensure that the programme's fundamental objective, support to the peace process be guaranteed in both the content and delivery of the programme*.[18]

The submission went on to make several detailed proposals about the content and administration of the new programme.

In April 1995, Clár Nua made a second submission to the European Commission welcoming the planned Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (PEACE I). It endorsed the intention that the programme be 'social inclusion and reconciliation proofed'; but expressed concern that the social inclusion guidelines directed that partnerships should be "designed and managed on a cross-community basis":

> *We believe that this narrow definition of reconciliation would appear to pander to tokenism rather than addressing the needs of communities. It does not recognise the developmental process which will lead to full social inclusion and real reconciliation based on equality, equity and parity of esteem, nor does it reflect the complexity of conflict in Ireland or of its communities and their relationships.*
>
> *If this is to be the basis of the 'social inclusion and reconciliation proofing' then this clause would exclude worthwhile, valid and much needed projects as it links the development of a community to the consent of another community. This runs contrary to the targeting of resources to tackle disadvantage and ignores the rights and needs of communities*.[19]

US President Bill Clinton appointed Senator George J. Mitchell as his Special Envoy for Northern Ireland in 1995. At first, his remit was on economic development, and a team under Charles 'Chuck' Meissner, Assistant Secretary of Commerce, supported Mitchell's team. One of the first interventions was a US trade mission that would include west Belfast. Community organisations from the Falls and Shankill areas came together to

assist the Department of Commerce staff plan the trade mission. The Industrial Development Board (IDB) and Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU) were dismissive of the communities' representations and actively hostile to proposals for serious investment in north and west Belfast. In contrast, while Mitchell and his team became more engaged in the 'political' side of things, the Department of Commerce people were positively involved with community groups working for economic and social development.

In May 1995, when President Clinton hosted a major conference in Washington, community groups participated in consultations about the format, and a large contingent of community activists received invitations. Clár Nua made the case to White House representatives that the conference should encompass a range of economic development issues rather than focus narrowly on industrial development promotion. The conference would be taking place in the context of the peace process and should be clearly linked to that process. Inward investment should target the areas most affected by neglect and discrimination. Agencies promoting investment should engage directly with people living in those communities. "The possibilities, assuming there is a genuine commitment to consultation and mutual respect, are infinite."[20] Clár Nua would use the Washington conference "to explain to potential investors that they can make a significant contribution to the peace process – or exacerbate existing problems and undermine the peace process – through their investment choices."[21]

Following a plane crash in April 1996 that claimed the lives of US Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown, Chuck Meissner, and 33 others, the US State Department took on a more prominent role, inevitably more interested in political negotiations and less supportive of community development. However, community groups were still invited to the follow-up 1996 conference in Philadelphia.

Despite intensive lobbying, no overall funding package in support of the Clár Nua strategic framework was forthcoming. A purportedly friendly departmental official suggested that west Belfast community representatives were too strident in their demands. Making Belfast Work officials suggested that Shankill Road groups should have been involved. Nevertheless, since then, the Clár Nua agenda has informed many of the social, economic and cultural developments in west Belfast and beyond.

The Springvale 'Peaceline' campus

In 1993, the University of Ulster (now Ulster University) first announced its plan for a 'Peaceline Campus' on a site between Belfast's Falls and Shankill areas. Like many others, they had their eye on the much talked about 'peace dividend', and the university was selling it as both a peace project and a regeneration project. It would require external funding, such as the EU Regional Development Funds, to be viable and external funding would not be forthcoming without community support.

Community leaders on both sides were initially dubious. A significant concern was safety; although peace was in the air, the situation on the ground remained dangerous. Still, the university proposed a multi-million-pound investment, and both communities badly needed regeneration. The Foundry Regeneration Trust on the Nationalist side and the Forthriver Regeneration Trust on the Unionist side had been working to encourage economic and social development in their areas, which suffered from significant economic and social deprivation and educational underachievement. Early discussions with the university were not inspiring. While they waxed lyrical about the economic benefits for local communities, these amounted to not much more than some student housing and small-scale retail – pizza parlours were mentioned – serving the student population.

Eventually, after many difficult discussions and the inclusion of the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (BIFHE), the Springvale Community Campus Partnership was set up in 1997. A Memorandum of Understanding between educational bodies and community representatives was signed. The partnership included the two trusts and several other community leaders, including Billy Hutchinson of the Progressive Unionist Party. Again, it was a situation when local people sharing common interests could build alliances without compromising their political allegiances.

As the Northern Ireland Audit Office report later indicated, there was a very high elevation of expectations. Eileen Howell of Falls Community Council advocated a radical suggestion that would have been truly transformative. She proposed a 'health' corridor linking the university to the teaching colleges and the City and Royal Victoria Hospitals. The university and new industrial development would build a research cluster based on biotechnologies. Community activists worked hard to develop this idea. Visits were made to New York City University and community development

corporations in the United States. Many conversations took place with US policymakers and potential investors.

The proposal was for a £71.7 million project with three main elements:

- Main campus: To be shared between 1,500 further and 1,500 higher education students, at an estimated cost of £59 million.
- Community outreach centre: To act as a hub for various community and outreach programmes and as a training facility (£4 million).
- Applied research centre: To draw on existing research in the university, stimulate inward investment and develop local companies in start-up units (£8 million).

After almost five years of complex negotiations, the Springvale Educational Village Project was officially launched. US President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair cut the first sod on 3 September 1998. Professor Patrick Murphy, Director of BIFHE, said: "Today we begin the new Northern Ireland." University of Ulster's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Lord Smith of Clifton, said the start of the campus was "a triumph for the people of north and west Belfast" and "a symbol of hope for the future of Northern Ireland".[22]

The International Fund for Ireland (IFI) was the largest external funder; it contributed a total of £8.2 million. IFI Chairman Willie McCarter praised what he called a "particularly imaginative project. …The creation of an inner city campus in west Belfast, which has endured so much of the violence of the Troubles, will prove to be a major regenerative engine and will contribute directly to reconciliation in the area."[23]

In a letter to Mr McCarter, President Clinton wrote: "You should know that my view of the fund is that it has played, and will continue to play, a vital role in community regeneration, creating the conditions for peace to thrive."[24] In two years, the first phase was to be completed.

In October 2002, five years after it had submitted the Springvale proposal, the university announced that it was withdrawing from the project due to its concerns about affordability. Up to that point, the project had spent £9.2 million. Regarding the planned facilities, only the community outreach centre was complete, with a cost of £4 million covered by funding from the Millennium Commission and a private donor. Building work on the main campus and applied research centre had yet to start.[25]

The Northern Ireland Audit Office report was scathing. It said that direct losses amounted to £3.6 million but that overall costs, in terms of time expended by government departments and local communities, "cannot be quantified". There were "poor financial planning" and "unduly optimistic" viability predictions. Damningly, it added:

> *Of particular concern to the committee was the pattern that, when the university wanted Springvale, it was affordable and viable but, in the later stages, when the university clearly had a change of heart, it became unaffordable and unviable. Indeed, the contrast between the early optimism and the later assessments of viability is so great as to raise the concern within the committee that project appraisals were not only carried out at below the appropriate standard but may even have been manipulated to get the desired results.*[26]

Today, Ulster University's newly-expanded city centre campus "is situated in the artistic and cultural centre of the city, the Cathedral Quarter. … the campus spans an increasing and exciting range of subjects, including computing, engineering, business, politics, policy, law, communication, sports, architecture, hospitality, event management, photography and digital animation."[27] Medicine and Health Sciences are located at the Derry/Londonderry campus. The Community Learning Centre at Belfast Metropolitan College (formerly BIFHE) occupies the Springvale site, "providing conference facilities and office space to businesses, community groups and the public sector."[28]

PEACE I consultative forum

The EU's Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland 1995-1999 (PEACE I) brought a different perspective and many new opportunities. The impacts of the EU programmes (we have had PEACE II, III, and IV and are now in PEACE PLUS) cannot be overestimated. Most of these have been well documented elsewhere and came after the 1998 *Agreement*, so they are not for discussion here. However, the first of the programmes was unique because it is the only one with a Consultative Forum involving a wide range of civic society actors as an integral part of the programme structure.

One of the game-changing features was the EU's insistence on the 'partnership principle'; that is, the statutory bodies were required – at

different levels – to engage civil society actors in designing and implementing the programmes. Subsequent programmes never repeated the PEACE I Consultative Forum; like the Northern Ireland Civic Forum written into the 1998 *Agreement*, it was the victim of hostility by politicians and influential civil servants. The rationale for PEACE I was unambiguous:

> *… there is a forceful argument that the single most important constraint on Northern Ireland's economic and social development has been the existence of the community conflict in the region …*
>
> *The importance of the socio-economic difficulties in the context of the Peace Initiative is that disadvantage often feeds and sustains the conflict. It is frequently the most deprived areas which have suffered the most and been most involved in the conflict. It is axiomatic, therefore, that socio-economic difficulties must be tackled if the peace process is to be embedded.*[29]

The Consultative Forum was the first of its type in Europe. It had a responsibility "to ensure that the principles of peace and reconciliation and social inclusion are reflected in the administration of the programme."[30] It had 80 members (60 from Northern Ireland and 20 from the border counties); the membership comprised representatives drawn from the voluntary sectors, the community sector, local government, employers and employee organisations, representatives of women's groups, the agricultural and fishing industries, the education sector, statutory bodies and other interests.[31]

The forum had some significant rights and responsibilities. These included:

- drawing the attention of the Programme Monitoring Committee to any issues of concern about programme implementation;
- to be consulted about any significant amendments to the programme;
- to comment on the annual report of the programme before its adoption by the monitoring committee;
- to offer an opinion on the outcome of any interim assessment of the programme's effectiveness before the monitoring committee adopts such an assessment.[32]

Over the programme's life, the forum would give opinions on the annual reports and mid-term review, raising issues of sustainability, additionality, complementarity, bureaucracy and accountability. While fulfilling these responsibilities, the forum frequently conflicted with Northern Ireland's Department for Finance and Personnel (DFP). For example, it recommended withholding approval of the 1998 programme annual report for its failure to provide basic financial data; for failing to show allocations, commitment and spending levels; and for providing data in inconsistent periods. In his review of the PEACE II Programme, Brian Harvey noted that the European Court of Auditors' report on PEACE I had found significant problems with PEACE I "almost universally on the government side."[33] An achievement that could be credited to the forum was establishing the Special EU Programmes Body to manage the cross-border EU programmes. Project promoters no longer have to negotiate for 'match' funding from public bodies in the two jurisdictions. No small thing in this island's political and fiscal context and envied in other EU cross-border regions.

The PEACE I programme was designed to catalyse middle and grassroots activities to reinforce the climate for top-level negotiations, compensating for the conflict's costs and expediting overall development. The Consultative Forum, often to the chagrin of the programme's civil servants, was effectively catalysed from the start.

During its first meeting, members received guidance that the Consultative Forum would convene twice a year during office hours, reimbursing participant expenses. The forum came into existence without a constitution or standing orders. It was evident that a considerable disparity existed between what was required from the forum as set out in the programme and the intentions of the DFP; the dead hand of which required frequent addressing. From its earliest days, the forum found itself embroiled in a struggle to get a budget. Much time was taken up with negotiating and lobbying for the payment of basic administration costs. Two years after the forum was established, there was still no agreed budget for the secretariat, and it took the intervention of European Commission representatives to get funding released to provide additional consultancy support to the forum.[34]

Forum members very quickly had to establish a set of structures and procedures that would allow them to carry out the tasks defined for them by the monitoring committee. Even though most delegates had never worked together – or even met – before, there was much enthusiasm and

commitment; two meetings per year, they quickly recognised, would be insufficient. "The forum was considered by many delegates as a ground-breaking opportunity to ensure that the programme really was 'special' and delivered real social and economic change to communities most in need."[35]

From the inception, there was a broad consensus that the principle of a single programme for Northern Ireland and the border counties should be embedded in the Consultative Forum structures and ways of working. The joint chairs were nominated separately by delegates from each side of the border and then elected by the membership as a whole at the second meeting of the forum in July 1996; they were deemed two halves of a single chairperson. At the first meeting, delegates agreed on establishing an independent secretariat, appointing the Sligo Chamber of Commerce after a tendering process. In October 1996, a monitoring and evaluation working group was established. By November 1996, a steering group became formally constituted; its 14 members were drawn from business, trade unions, rural development, farming, local government and the community and voluntary sector. The steering group met 31 times between July 1996 and December 1999; and was newly reconstituted in June 1998, March 1999 and June 1999, as some people withdrew and others volunteered.[36] Early in 1997, the steering group prepared an ambitious two-year development plan and a detailed work plan. In all, there were 12 forum meetings, with an average attendance of 40, over the programme's life.

Brian Harvey reported a feeling in the political and administrative establishment that the PEACE I programme had been 'captured' by the voluntary and community sector:

> *There was some pressure to push back the territorial gains of the sector, which were resented by some elected representatives. PEACE I was 'too populist', and civic society was 'getting out of hand'.*
>
> *There was strong pressure from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Confederation of British Industry for a more economic focus. Informal comments were made that PEACE I had supported 'dodgy social projects' and that PEACE II should go for substantial, sustainable, long-lasting economic projects … One leading UUP representative reportedly told the monitoring committee that the new programme should be 'economically driven', with no more 'waste' of money on voluntary and community sector projects*.[37]

The European Commission, however, rejected the draft operational programme because it was "unclear, imprecise, failed to provide sufficient information, paid insufficient attention to a number of issues (e.g. the horizontal principles) or to the indicators." It insufficiently linked north and south, failed to highlight the programme's distinctiveness, inadequately identified target groups and failed to draw out the lessons from PEACE I. "The Commission questioned the absence of the Consultative Forum and the lack of justification for its omission."[38]

Ultimately, there was no PEACE II Consultative Forum, even though it was an "important feature of … PEACE I … was positively noted by the mid-term review and the European Court of Auditors. It … [was] dropped from the [new] programme" without explanation.

> *Granted the importance of the forum and the valuable role it had played, this was extraordinary and deserves further investigation. … It represented not merely an 'innovative tool' (European Court of Auditors, 2000; Coopers & Lybrand, 1997), but a practical working out of the ideas of new forms of participative governance in modern European civil society.*
>
> *The absence of a consultative forum in PEACE II was explained at official level in terms that the forum was unproductive, costly and unrepresentative. This view does not appear to be substantiated by the evidence. The cost of the forum was slightly over £45,000 a year (1998, 1999), small compared to the programme as a whole (€500m) or even to its modest technical assistance budget. The forum experienced considerable difficulty in getting any financial assistance at all … A considerable amount of voluntary time and energy went into the forum. … It is certainly true that the forum gave critical opinions.*[39]

The evidence of the shortcomings of the forum was cited as a consultants' report commissioned by the DFP and the Republic of Ireland's Department of Finance (DoF) (1999).

> *In reality, the report had much to say about the forum that was positive, such as its qualitative impact, the balance of membership, its commitment to cross-border working, its success in raising a long list of issues, its enlistment of voluntary effort (up to 750 person days), the depth in which it considered matters, its ability to sustain itself on*

> *limited resources and its low cost (less than £150,000 overall). It did what it set out to do. The consultants were critical of its under-resourcing, the monitoring committee for not taking it seriously enough and nominating bodies for not ensuring that their representatives attended. Although they were critical of some aspects of its work (so was the forum itself), for example, attendance levels, there were attenuating factors. They described the view that it was taken over by the voluntary and community sector as unfair and incorrect.*[40]

As Brian Harvey commented, the Consultative Forum disappeared without options being weighed and considered; it was "airbrushed out of the heritage of the programme… doomed by a consultants' report which had only limited circulation and which was, to say the least, selectively interpreted by government."[41]

Conclusion

In this essay, I have offered just a few examples of where civil society groups and individuals came together, in Lederach's words, attempting to overcome the structural, relational and cultural contradictions that lie at the root of conflict, whose efforts underpinned the processes of peacemaking and peacekeeping on this island. I hope I have demonstrated that effective coalitions for positive social and economic change that can transform the causes of conflict can be built without asking or expecting those involved to abandon their identities or political allegiances. These cases also show that challenging the status quo can meet considerable resistance from people and institutions not used to being challenged. There is much unfinished business in our peace process. The efforts of civil society actors for social and economic justice before the *Agreement* set the agenda for the *Agreement*. I believe many of the changes since then reflect their legacy. But space needs to be created for a new generation to build on what has gone before. Much has been gained, but considerable ground has been lost as well. We must not allow further erosion of that legacy.

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Securing Strong Human Rights & Equality Protections in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement:

The power of North-South, East-West collaboration

Martin O'Brien

Martin O'Brien *directs the Social Change Initiative (SCI), a Belfast-based international NGO working to improve the effectiveness of activism for progressive social change. Before founding SCI, he was Senior Vice President at Atlantic Philanthropies. From 1987 to 2004, Martin was director of the Committee on the Administration of Justice. He has received several international awards recognising his human rights and peacebuilding work. He has extensive experience in high-impact philanthropy, fundraising, human rights, advocacy, and conflict resolution.*

I first got involved in peace and reconciliation work in 1976 when, at the age of twelve, I joined the peace marches organised across Northern Ireland to call for an end to violence. The marches came after a particularly violent summer and an incident which seemed to sum up the madness of the conflict when three small children were killed on Finaghy Road North in Belfast on 11th August 1976. Joanne Maguire was 8, and her brothers Andrew and John were 6 and 2, respectively. Their deaths unleashed huge public sentiment against violence, with almost weekly marches and demonstrations across Northern Ireland. Some solidarity marches were organised in the Republic, and there was a big march in London towards the end of November 1976, at which Joan Baez sang. Still, there was no sustained work outside Northern Ireland and little, if any, North-South or East-West dimension. The movement became known as the *Peace People*, and its founders went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

On the back of this experience, in the early 1980s, together with other young people, I formed a group called Youth for Peace. It focused on tackling religious segregation and creating opportunities for cross-community dialogue among young people. At that time, we made some limited cross-border contact through the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, but our focus was mainly internal to Northern Ireland. Others were engaged in more explicit North-South and East-West peacebuilding, but I was not one of them.

A peaceful society must be a fair one

Through Youth for Peace, I quickly learned that fear and prejudice towards often unknown others was a critical barrier to peace and reconciliation. But it became apparent, too, that we all experienced life in Northern Ireland in very different ways. Issues of justice and fairness were key drivers of the conflict, and a lasting peace would depend not just on better interpersonal relationships and understanding but also on creating a society where everyone felt they would be treated with fairness and equality.

In 1987 that realisation led me to my first paid job when I began to work for the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ). It was and still is a cross-community group of lawyers, academics, trade unionists and community workers focused on ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law. CAJ was established in 1981 by leading figures in the peace movement working alongside a few academics. Its establishment coincided with the prison hunger strikes, which resulted in the deaths of ten prisoners, significant public demonstrations, and wider unrest across the whole community with further loss of life.

CAJ was founded on the belief that a peaceful society must be fair. It began by holding conferences, publishing reports, and lobbying for an end to the use of emergency law, for better systems for police accountability and for independent systems to investigate complaints against the police.[1] In later years, it considerably expanded its agenda to include issues around the rights of prisoners and children and broader concerns about inequality and discrimination. The broadening of its agenda itself expanded the scope for North-South and East-West cooperation.

In its early years, CAJ had some ad hoc contact with its counterpart organisations in Britain and Ireland, but its focus and work were almost

exclusively internal to Northern Ireland. The National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL and subsequently Liberty) was established in 1934 in London and even produced a report in 1936 on emergency legislation in Northern Ireland. The Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL) was established only five years before CAJ in 1976 but was solely concerned with civil liberties in the Republic of Ireland. Other groups like Justice, based in London and the UK affiliate of the International Commission of Jurists, were, to my knowledge, inactive on Northern Ireland issues. It's fair to say that there was very little organised interest in either Britain or Ireland in the civil liberties problems in Northern Ireland in the 1980s. There was undoubtedly no sustained North-South, East-West work programme on the issues. Northern Ireland was very much a 'place apart', and its issues rarely entered mainstream discussions in any substantive way in Britain or Ireland. That was certainly true in respect of human rights concerns.

From time to time, CAJ did try to draw prominent legal figures from Britain and the Republic of Ireland into discussions about human rights in Northern Ireland, inviting them to speak at conferences and events. Indeed, the discovery of a bomb planted under the car of Lord Gardiner,[2] a former British Lord Chancellor invited to participate in the inaugural CAJ conference at Queen's University in 1981 meant that security had to evacuate the event.

An interesting insight into the appropriateness or otherwise of active North-South engagement in CAJ's human rights work arose after the 1985 *Anglo-Irish Agreement*. The Unionist community widely opposed this important political initiative because of the role it gave the Irish government in matters relating to Northern Ireland. From its outset, CAJ had decided that to avoid political controversy and to maintain its cross-community approach and membership, it should take no position on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. It held that whoever was responsible for the jurisdiction should respect the internationally agreed human rights standards they had signed up to. Accordingly, a few years after its founding and on the back of the *Anglo-Irish Agreement*, CAJ faced a decision as to whether it should more actively engage with the Irish government, given its new formal role in Northern Ireland's affairs. After some internal debate, the organisation agreed that it should engage with anyone in a position to influence the human rights situation in Northern Ireland.[3]

It was, however, only in 1991, ten years after its establishment, that CAJ started to seriously re-assess its primary focus on influencing direct rule

ministers. Taking stock of its progress and its sense of being largely ineffective in its lobbying of Westminster, a series of planning reviews led to a significant change in approach and the development of an intentional and sustained effort to influence international opinion underpinned by a strong North-South, East-West approach.

Even though the organisation had a cross-community membership, was firmly opposed to violence, rigorously relied on evidence, applied internationally agreed standards, and took no stance on the question of Northern Ireland's constitutional position, its concerns were often ignored and sometimes dismissed as being anti-government, or politically motivated. CAJ's treatment and experience were likely no different from other rights groups worldwide. Governments often adopt multiple strategies designed to neutralise and deflect any criticism. CAJ, however, was keen that its concerns not be ignored or marginalised.

Internationalising concerns about human rights

We concluded that our efforts to change legislation and practice had not had the desired impact. To tackle this problem, we consciously chose to embark on a long-term effort to move the discussion about human rights and equality beyond the borders of Northern Ireland and Great Britain. We felt that embarrassment and criticism coming only from Northern Ireland was easily ignored and that pressure from elsewhere would have much more impact. If we could get our concerns raised in international fora where the UK was often criticising others that might bring better leverage than quiet, well-argued, and fact-based submissions at home.

Therefore, we decided to take advantage of the steadily growing international interest in human rights around the world and the evolving opportunities at the UN level to have the UK's human rights record scrutinised. Simultaneously we concluded that taking advantage of these opportunities would be easier if a shared perspective and analysis came from human rights groups across the two islands. It would also be easier to make progress if international human rights groups were engaged and supportive of the effort. These three elements effectively formed the basis for a new three-pronged approach to the work.

A consensus of concern among groups across Britain and Ireland was an essential element in the effort – it would be harder to dismiss and would

generate broader international support and pressure than a single voice from Northern Ireland, regardless of how credible it was. In turn, a North-South, East-West consensus endorsed by international actors could not be easily characterised at home as partisan, and consequently, it would be harder to ignore.

In April 1992, CAJ working with Liberty and another London-based group, the Britain and Ireland Human Rights Project, organised a Northern Ireland Human Rights Assembly in London. Over three days, 250 people attended and 12 separate commissions of inquiry, each chaired by internationally respected human rights experts, took written and oral evidence from people across the community in Northern Ireland on the spectrum of economic, social, cultural, and civil and political rights concerns. Topics covered included freedom of movement, the right to fair trial and participation in public affairs and access to public services, and freedom from discrimination, torture, and inhuman and degrading treatment. The final report entitled *Broken Covenants*[4] represented an authoritative statement of the range of human rights problems related to Northern Ireland and identified solutions to address them.

Building on this work, CAJ, Liberty, ICCL and the Scottish Council for Civil Liberties (SCCL) organised themselves as the British-Irish Panel of the International Federation for Human Rights, an international organisation with consultative status at the United Nations. The four groups were all members. They started meeting regularly to address shared areas of concern and developed joint or coordinated positions and interventions to UN mechanisms.

For example, from 1992 onwards, CAJ began to make submissions and send delegations to bodies like the UN Committee Against Torture, the UN Human Rights Committee, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. We worked in conjunction with the other groups, coordinating our efforts. Another key player in the work was British-Irish Rights Watch (a successor to the Britain and Ireland Human Rights Project, which had been an organiser of the 1992 London Human Rights Assembly). Based in London, they developed extensive relationships across the whole community in Northern Ireland, providing practical support and assistance to victims of human rights violations and advocating locally, nationally, and internationally for redress.

Over time, the approach yielded results, and the various UN committees frequently endorsed our complaints. We then worked hard to ensure the maximum publicity for their comments in the national and international press. We found – as expected – that at that time, the UK government was concerned about its international human rights reputation. Critical UN interventions leading to embarrassing media coverage meant that these interventions almost immediately helped secure concrete changes in policy and practice – for example, concerning the treatment of detainees.

In turn, we encouraged international organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the then Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (now Human Rights First) and the International Commission for Jurists to become more engaged in raising concerns about human rights issues in Northern Ireland. Increasingly in the 1990s, when the UK's record was up for examination at UN bodies, the submissions from many of these organisations were aligned to highlight and support a shared list of priorities and concerns. Organisations like Amnesty International, the International Federation for Human Rights and the International Commission of Jurists all had speaking rights at UN fora. They began to include concerns about human rights in Northern Ireland in their remarks.

Later, we would also invite UN Rapporteurs to visit Northern Ireland and encourage international human rights groups like Human Rights Watch and the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights to send delegations to Northern Ireland and publish reports on their findings. Similarly, individual cases were pursued successfully at the European Court of Human Rights.[5]

Given the global influence of the United States and its strong ties and relationships with both the UK and Ireland, efforts were also made to engage with bipartisan members of the US Congress and the US Administration. Several members of congress visited Northern Ireland, where they met with people from across the community, government officials, police, lawyers, and civil society organisations. On the back of these visits, congress also began to organise formal hearings on the human rights situation in Northern Ireland, where civil society groups could testify. This all added further impetus to the concerns.

Building a North-South, East-West consensus

A key event that helped kick start and shape this work occurred in January 1993 when CAJ and ICCL co-hosted a conference at Trinity College in Dublin. *The States We Are In* was billed as the first conference organised to take stock of the human rights situation across the whole island. Again, more than 250 people attended and alongside the inputs from CAJ and ICCL, there was input on the state of civil liberties in England by the eminent British human rights lawyer Gareth Pierce. Specific slots were also included on the agenda for Liberty and the SCCL.

The debate was very consciously presented as a North-South, East-West conversation. It had become increasingly apparent at our regular meetings of the British-Irish panel of FIDH[6] that Northern Ireland's situation benefitted from the active engagement of like-minded civil liberties groups. Moreover, it was increasingly apparent that developments or problems in one part of the two islands had consequences for all the other parts. The goal should be to raise the bar for human rights protections across all jurisdictions rather than to see governments copying the worst approaches adopted in one place or another. This idea foreshadowed the text in the *1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement,* which refers to equivalent levels of human rights protection in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

While we were pressing on with our efforts to get more attention and traction on the human rights aspects of the conflict, it was clear that opportunities were beginning to arise on the political front and that behind-the-scenes efforts were being made to try to end the violence. These efforts would present opportunities to raise our concerns and secure an increased focus on them.

The States We Are In conference took place in the wake of the 16th December 1992 Coleraine speech by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Sir Patrick Mayhew, when he said that the British government "had no preselected constitutional outcome" and that Sinn Féin could participate in future talks if the Irish Republican Army (IRA) ended their violence. On 24th December 1992, the IRA announced a three-day ceasefire. Picking up the theme that significant negotiations were on the horizon, the organisers of the January 1993 conference suggested that the issues it covered provided a checklist of things to be tackled to secure justice and peace.

The joint collaborative approach continued and solidified further in December 1994 with what became known as the *Declaration on Human Rights, the Northern Ireland Conflict and the Peace Process*.[7] It was issued on Human Rights Day, 10th December 1994 and was signed by CAJ, ICCL, Liberty, SCCL and British-Irish Rights Watch.

It's worth looking at the full text of the *Declaration*, but it began by stating that: "Firm and effective legal protection of human rights and civil liberties, and the creation of a culture in which everyone's human rights are respected, are crucial if the peace process is to succeed." It continued: "At this historic moment, there is a unique opportunity to put in place new structures which will defend and promote human rights." It called on all those involved in negotiating a new political framework for Northern Ireland to recognise the central role of human rights and civil liberties in ensuring just and lasting peace in the longer term. It suggested that new systems of justice were required to address the injustices of the past and provide rights for the future and that everyone in Northern Ireland should be entitled to be engaged and involved in the peace process and to have their rights guaranteed.

The *Declaration* specifically noted that the effects of the conflict had not been confined to Northern Ireland and had led to the introduction of draconian legislation and practices in Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales. It called for an end to some specific concrete practices relating to policing and criminal justice and for measures to protect prisoners' rights and prevent discrimination.

What's most striking about the December 1994 *Declaration* is the extent to which it influenced future action. It made the following calls:

- *A broadly-based and representative Commission on Policing must be instituted to examine the nature, structure and methods of policing in Northern Ireland with a view to producing a model of policing which is representative of and has the confidence of all sections of the community and which is impartial, just and fully accountable.*
- *A fully independent system for investigating complaints against the police must be established.*
- *A Bill of Rights must be enacted which protects the rights and liberties of everyone.*

- *The criminal justice system in Northern Ireland should be thoroughly and independently reviewed and, where necessary, changed.*
- *An independent Commission of Investigation must be instituted in order to investigate human rights abuses arising from the emergency legislation.*
- *Human rights education and awareness must become an integral part of every school curriculum and training programme.*

The Patten Commission to reform policing, a review of the criminal justice system and provisions to explore the scope for a Bill of Rights were all included four years later in the *1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement*. Action had already taken place before reaching the *Agreement* to establish an independent system to investigate complaints against the police. Only the last two elements appear to have had limited traction.

The *Declaration* concluded: "Human rights belong to everyone, being universal and inalienable. Our societies, our legal systems, and our political processes should affirm and guarantee that guiding principle."

Following the *Declaration*, the five organisations hosted an expert seminar and a large public conference in Belfast on March 11th and 12th, 1995. Attended by a broad cross-section of civil society and representatives from the British, Irish and United States governments, the event aimed to stimulate wider public debate about the issues raised in the *Declaration*. The international human rights groups mentioned previously were also present.

In the preface[8] to the March 1995 conference report, the organisers note:

> *Human rights have been at the very heart of the conflict in Northern Ireland. They must therefore be at the heart of the peace process. Throughout the history of Northern Ireland, the law has failed to guarantee equal and adequate protection of the rights and liberties of all citizens. The past has taught us that the failure to safeguard civil liberties is a mistake with tragic consequences. Accordingly, the manner in which human rights are protected and safeguarded in future will largely determine the stability and nature of the peace.*

The sentiments in this paragraph are echoed in the preamble to the *1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* when it asserts:

The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the rights of all.

Spelling out an agenda for change

The 1995 conference took the opportunity to expand on the issues initially identified in the *Declaration*, calling this new programme Human Rights: The Agenda for Change. A detailed 18-point agenda was encapsulated in five key elements – human rights constitutional guarantees, legislative measures, institutional changes, dealing with the legacy of the past, and building for the future. Key additions were a call for more extensive legislation to tackle discrimination and address continuing inequality, specific provisions to tackle the legacy of the past and measures to support the reintegration of former prisoners. The 1998 *Agreement* addressed nearly all 18 points. Still, its focus on a "fresh start", whilst built upon a dedication to "the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all", failed to adequately address the last two categories of the Human Rights Agenda for Change. In drawing a clear line with the past, the *Agreement* failed to sufficiently address the legacy of that past and the shadow it would cast on any serious building for the human rights future envisaged.

This omission continues to be a source of ongoing problems. Despite subsequent efforts to address that problem, and indeed some agreement between the Northern Irish political parties about how it should be tackled, the UK government has reneged on that agreed approach. Instead, it is currently implementing proposals that effectively prevent examination of the past. Their approach contradicts the wishes of victims' groups and every Northern Irish political party. It is also likely to cause problems for the UK government regarding its international commitments under the European Convention on Human Rights.

Similarly, there has been insufficient focus on the shared future discussed by the Human Rights Agenda for Change. The 1995 conference noted that "the values which underpin the Universal Declaration of Human Rights must be made to imbue our political institutions and our legal systems". It went on

to say that "vigilance is ever necessary. In our schools, places of work, homes, political and social organisations, there must be an understanding of and commitment to the protection and promotion not only of our own rights, but just as importantly, the rights of others." The years since the passage of the *Agreement* show just how accurate these objectives are, but critical measures such as securing a Bill of Rights, equality proofing, targeting social need, mobilising anti-poverty efforts, and promoting reconciliation between and across communities have still a journey to travel.

Notably, the March 1995 conference, organised by the British and Irish coalition of human rights groups, was addressed[9] by John Shattuck, the then Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor in the Clinton administration. In his remarks, Shattuck said:

> *Today, here in Belfast, there is another odyssey of hope, another struggle for human rights taking place before the world – and all the world is watching. You in this room are propelling it forward. In the last seven months, Northern Ireland has become one of the places where visions of peace and justice are coming to life. These visions were perhaps once held only by grieving relatives and families – including many of you here – but are now vindicating the hopes and dreams of people in Northern Ireland of various backgrounds, eager for a better life for their children and a new start for their country.*

In his concluding remarks, he paid particular tribute to the groups involved in the work to advance the human rights agenda:

> *The non-governmental organisations represented here in his room, and your counterparts elsewhere, are in many ways the key institutions of peace in Northern Ireland, and the key institutions of justice. It is you who synthesize politics and culture; it is you who cultivate ties of trust and solidarity; it is you who create networks of cooperation across group lines; and above all, it is you who pressure governments to deal with the injustices that have occurred.*

Shattuck concluded by passing on greetings from President Clinton and good wishes for the success of "this very important conference". He summed up the benefits brought to a divided society by focusing on human rights. He commented: "Guaranteed human rights do not simply balance communities off against each other; they make it possible for communities to develop a broadly shared allegiance to justice that enables them to work out their

inevitable differences." His points remain equally relevant today as we think about the future and how to navigate the challenges ahead.

The active participation of a US government figure in this event and his endorsement of the need to put human rights and equality at the heart of peacebuilding was a significant success.

Shattuck's remarks both identified and presaged a vibrant human rights community burgeoning with strong links North-South and East-West. As a result of this growing collaboration, a nascent Equality Coalition started to come into being, and the roots were laid for the subsequent creation of what is now the Northern Ireland Human Rights Consortium. Many of the members of these alliances have members on either a North-South basis, an East-West basis, or both.

I co-convened the Equality Coalition with Inez McCormack, who headed up UNISON in Northern Ireland, a UK-wide trade union. She was central to this work and was the driving force for a fairer, more equal society over many years. She successfully used her extensive networks of contacts across the two islands, in Europe and particularly in the United States, to champion the inclusion of substantial human rights and equality measures in the peace agreement.

Importantly unions were also connected on an all-island basis via the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, of which Inez later became the first woman president. One groundbreaking manifestation of this work was UNISON's collaboration with other North-South entities to equality-proof the cross-border 12-county EU Peace and Reconciliation funding programme. This led to the seminal *Making Women Seen and Heard* report[10] in March 1998, just before the *Agreement*. The report was launched with the support of the then European Commissioner for Regional Policy. Similar efforts to focus on disadvantage and exclusion led to the early roots of the Participation and the Practice of Rights group. So, from a 'place apart', Northern Ireland's burgeoning human rights community seeded and mobilised a range of important North-South, East-West initiatives.

Conclusion

By working together on a North-South and East-West basis with the support of the international human rights community, we managed to bring human rights concerns from the margins to the mainstream.[11] The shared positions and consensus we developed became the orthodoxy and effectively shaped the future narrative and agenda to address human rights and equality concerns in Northern Ireland. As the negotiations to reach an agreement intensified, we maintained our links with the local political parties, the British, Irish and US governments. In the negotiations' final stages, we went so far as to provide concrete wording to address particular issues and many of the suggestions made their way into the final text of the *1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement*. A number of the parties, particularly the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, were key advocates for the inclusion of solid provisions to protect and advance human rights and equality.

A careful reading of the *Agreement* shows the influence this coalition of groups had, which can be traced back to the work it began in 1992. The investments in developing a North-South and East-West consensus on these issues were powerfully effective and yielded significant returns.

In December 1998, CAJ and UNISON hosted a conference in Belfast, and the keynote speaker was Mary Robinson, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. In her speech, she paid tribute to the work of both organisations[12] and said:

> *Few documents emerging from divisive and difficult political negotiations have so well captured the importance of fairness in creating right relationships. In its preambular paragraphs, throughout the text, and indeed in all the new institutions and mechanisms established as a result of the Agreement, concerns around fairness and justice are a recurring theme.*[13]

Brexit presented significant threats to these human rights gains, and civil society groups across Britain and Ireland have again mobilised to minimise the damage by securing specific provisions in the *Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol* to ensure no diminution of rights protections.[14]

In the coming period, it's increasingly clear that we will all have to work hard together to deliver on the promise of the *Agreement* and to address the emerging and growing challenges associated with the unfolding debate about future constitutional arrangements.

I believe a focus on ensuring fairness and protecting and advancing human rights, and equality must be central to those conversations. Building strong North-South and East-West relationships, dialogue and consensus on the importance of that will be indispensable to success.

Endnotes

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[12] CAJ's role in advancing the human rights protections in the Agreement was specifically recognised in 1998 when it was awarded the prestigious Council of Europe's Human Rights Prize.

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Pre-1998 Agreement:
Laying Foundations for Economic Achievements in North-South Businesses

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Introduction

The role of businesses on the island of Ireland in facilitating the peace process leading up to the *1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* is a crucial contributor to its ultimate success. As we commemorate the 25th anniversary of this pivotal accord, it is both prudent and meaningful to reflect upon the invaluable contribution made by the business community towards its realisation.

In the early 1990s, after 30 years of the deaths, injury, violence, destruction and fear caused by the Troubles, there was a universal hope, but not necessarily widely held conviction, that prosperity would follow peace. And

so commenced the daunting challenge of building confidence – albeit from a low base – that prosperity was an attainable goal.

Essentially, the task was to persuade business community investors, other stakeholders, politicians, and the divided communities they represented that this would happen given the necessary conditions of peace and stability created by and which the *Agreement* has ultimately delivered.

The external catalyst to commencing this task was the creation of an EU single market on 1st January 1993 – together with the paramilitary ceasefires that began soon after – enabling businesses in both jurisdictions to commence or expand, doing all-island business. Assistance came from policy influencers and representative organisations who promoted the concept as mutually beneficial.

The development and implementation of the basic foundations of an island/all-island economy within the new single market were remarkable given the immediate profound and evident legacy of the Troubles, temporary breakdowns in the Provisional Irish Republican Army (Provisional IRA) ceasefires and limited attention from politics and politicians on how precisely prosperity was to support the securing of peace.

The result was a new North-South economic interaction grounded in the confidence that the single market provided attractive and enabling conditions for businesses in both jurisdictions to move goods, services, people and capital freely. Subsequently, the *Agreement* put the political and institutional needs in place to underpin that commercial opportunity with peace and stability that supported investment and reassured investors.

However, companies and their management teams had to make supportive, occasionally challenging choices to capitalise on these conditions, often involving forging personal connections that spanned the border and navigated sectarian and cultural differences, especially in local areas 'at the heart of the conflict'. That said, the day-to-day experience of individuals successfully doing cross-border business with their immediate counterparts/customers was positive and progressive, where 'get the business done' was the predominant spirit.

This necessarily brief overview first looks at the foundations for peace and prosperity that the *Agreement* provides and which were put in place before it concluded in 1998. It looks at the political background businesses operated

within, especially for North-South economic interaction. Finally, it focuses on the origin of the island/all-island economy concept and how its principles were promoted, supported, or adopted by individual 'early mover' businesses, along with their representative organisations.

The 1998 Agreement and prosperity

The *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* significantly contributes to the unprecedented prosperity being experienced, albeit unevenly, on the island of Ireland. As chair, US Senator George J. Mitchell understood, reaching an agreement in the muti-party negotiations was necessary for the stability to deliver the additional economic growth and prosperity that would follow. Asked to provide material to support mediation classes run by the United States Institute for Peace, he put it succinctly:

> *Hope and opportunity are essential to political stability and peace in every society. Whatever people's differences, they want the same thing. They want to get their children off to a good start in life, they want to have a chance for a decent job, and so what is necessary in all of these conflict societies is to create a sense of hope, a vision, a possibility of the future. Without that hope, without that opportunity, peace is in peril everywhere*.[1]

However, viewed through the prism of what happened during the process that resulted in the *Agreement*, this economic objective was not at the forefront of the negotiator's minds until the very final hours before securing an accord. As economist Dr John Bradley, who pioneered much of the early economic research on the island economy, observed about North-South economic and business cooperation for the *Agreement*'s 20th anniversary:

> *Given the fraught political climate of* [the years immediately preceding the signing of the *Agreement*]*, it is understandable that economic and business questions were not regarded as central to the search for peace and were largely absent from the table during the* Agreement *negotiations. It was only in the concluding stages, when a political breakthrough finally seemed within grasp, that a hurried effort was made to introduce measures that would serve to promote cross-border trade, business cooperation and other issues of an economic or socio-economic kind.*

> *Compared with the crucial political aims, the economic and business elements were perhaps seen as a kind of 'add-on'. They recognised that the devastated Northern Ireland economy was in urgent need of renewal and that the growth of North-South economic and business interaction had some role to play in the recovery process.*[2]

This last point perhaps gets to the nub of what happened. There were only so many issues those around the table could deal with. As historians, along with those negotiators still with us, have noted, the extraordinary amount of political energy, effort and determination required to conclude the *Agreement* limited their focus and capacity to the core aims of ending thirty years of large-scale political violence, securing a commitment to pursuing political ends exclusively through democratic means, commencing the complex process of reconciliation and establishing institutions and their approaches to progress all of this.

Nevertheless, this lack of attention has brought a cost and a benefit. One result is that Northern Ireland, while in a demonstrably better economic condition than at any point in the 1990s, has still to maximise its post-*Agreement* economic potential. Instead, as I pointed out when giving the Centre for Cross Border Studies' 5th Annual Sir George Quigley Memorial Lecture in 2020: " … it is the Republic that has commercially 'banked' the greatest proportion of 'peace dividend' we spoke about in the 1990s."[3]

But while adding momentum to the nascent North-South economic interaction already happening was not central to the 1998 negotiating process, as John Bradley also observed in 2020: " ... the *Agreement*'s negotiators had no idea that these economic and business elements would take on an extraordinarily important role twenty years later in the Brexit negotiations."[4]

Of course, no one engaged in the *Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* negotiations could envision the UK leaving the EU, and so did not imagine, never mind consider such a scenario. Instead, what preoccupied the final hours of negotiation was crafting a response to political unionism objections to the British and Irish governments' joint proposals for strand two due to their long-held and deep concerns about North-South cross-border cooperation.

The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and its leader, the recently deceased Lord David Trimble, viewed proposals tabled on North-South cooperation during

the final days of the negotiations as 'a step too far'. He and his party colleagues judged the joint British and Irish government proposals to be a political threat to Northern Ireland's place in the union and not an additional opportunity for it to prosper and grow, thereby improving the 'material well-being' of unionists.

Only a determined intervention by Taoiseach Bertie Ahearn ensured that strand two included setting up a North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and six cross-border bodies as integral to the *Agreement*. But this outcome was less than what independent economic research and leading voices representing the business community had also previously proposed as sensible, desirable and possible.

Subsequently, political and policy discussions successfully addressed the concerns of the UUP and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), along with delivering the practical benefits of North-South economic interaction envisioned under strand two of the *Agreement*. Foremost in this regard is the work done by cross-border bodies such as InterTradeIreland, the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) and Tourism Ireland, along with the innovative and successful joined-up wholesale Single Electricity Market (SEM).

Nevertheless, overall policy decisions to support the all-island economy with North-South political cooperation post-1998 did not match the ambition of what was envisaged and proposed beforehand. Fortunately for the business community, joint EU membership and the EU single market still provided considerable scope to pursue their individual ambitions to further develop and grow existing North-South cross-border business or commence doing so for the first time.

An island economy

Administratively, the economy of the island of Ireland was under the governance of the UK before Partition, using an early form of 'devolved' administration. An enduring sense of past achievements in Ulster within that pre-1920/21 economy influences many policy conversations in Northern Ireland, usually recapturing that early twentieth-century position as a world leader and global hub. But as historian Jonathan Bardon has observed in the wake of Partition:

> *Hunger marked the years between the two world wars in Northern Ireland. During the winter of 1920, the brief post-war boom had juddered to a halt. By 1922, the unemployment rate reached 23%, and for the rest of the 1920s, on average, one-fifth of all insured workers had no jobs. For Northern Ireland, the* [Great] *Depression began early – the 'roaring twenties' had no meaning here. The slump developed into a protracted depression.*
>
> *No one predicted this. Was the Unionist Government to blame? No – Westminster had not really given it enough t power to provide significant help. And Belfast and Derry were not alone: Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester and Tyneside all suffered in the same way.*[5]

In other words, from its foundation, Northern Ireland experienced the long slow decline in the UK's nineteenth-century manufacturing predominance, a trend set in motion by the significant shifts in world trading conditions brought about by the dramatic changes of World War 1.

In addition, the three major urban centres outside Belfast – Derry/Londonderry, Enniskillen and Newry – were separated by Partition from their natural geographic hinterland of counties that had also been part of a relatively self-contained 'Ulster economic region' – Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth. World War 2 did provide a temporary boost to economic activity, as did an early 1960s influx of large UK chemical factories. But then the Troubles began.

During that dark and challenging period, Sir George Quigley served as Permanent Secretary in Northern Ireland's most important economic departments. Personally committed to a new and inclusive society and economy, upon retiring in 1988, he dedicated himself to researching, developing and sharing a new and progressive vision for a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland.

At this point, he was well aware of the then European Economic Community's (EEC) plans to create a single market with free movement of goods, services, finance and people to be launched on 1st January 1993. By becoming more directly involved with supporting the local business community on his retirement, he was alert to and engaged in the earliest moves by local companies to prepare for this dramatic change (unlike Brexit, there had been in-depth preparation and most of the new operating rules and regulations were agreed well in advance).

Unsurprisingly he took it upon himself to devise a vision for what this business operating environment would make possible in Northern Ireland. One that was different because it would be connected to a new European and global growth dynamic and had the potential to support peace with forward-looking and inclusive prosperity. In doing so, he was not alone but was a leader.

This vision was first presented in February 1992, well ahead of the single market commencing on 1st January 1993, at a Confederation of Irish Industry annual dinner (the CII and today Ibec). His address was titled *Ireland: An Island Economy*. Having assembled all the available facts, including from independent research that had already begun to scope what had to be done to give local economic activity a substantial boost, he highlighted that:

> *Accessibility, information and personal contact are essential for* [the] *efficient functioning of markets …* [so that] *… I would like to see the 'cross border' redefined to embrace the totality of economic relationships within the island … the EC regarding the island economy as a whole as the relevant entity and directing its attention to the needs of that economic area.*[6]

Because Ireland and the UK were then in the EEC, companies could rely on and benefit from the new cohesion of regulatory decisions made in Brussels to support and accelerate their ambition to grow. This was boosted by the economies of scale and proximity created for them by the removal of barriers to the free movement across the border on this island between two member states of people, goods, services and finance.

Over time, however, this business environment has supported progressive SMEs keen to grow and develop. But before the ceasefires and even in the immediate aftermath of the *Agreement*, this benefit was slow to develop. Understandably so, given the sundering of many cross-border relationships and trust by the impact of the Troubles. The complete experience of its effects on this island, particularly in the border region, was only possible after removing all security barriers blocking cross-border roads in 2006.

However, large companies, mainly those with Europe-wide operations, were first to appreciate the potential benefits and be best positioned to reorganise their operations to take advantage of the single market. And it was the 'early movers' amongst them who began to prepare for its launch in the late 1980s

by planning to take full advantage of the potential benefits of operating a 'single island' business within their new single European operations.

Doing all-island business

Following Partition, businesses were forced to choose to continue operating as before across a new inter-jurisdictional border or decide to do business in one jurisdiction only. Choosing to stay doing all-island business was not helped by the fact the new North-South border quickly acquired all the obstacles of state control that generated additional expense, complexity and inconvenience, such as the customs controls that were put in place as early as March 1921, within weeks of the border coming into existence.

Examples of those that did so include retail banks such as Bank of Ireland, which retained their identity as an all-island but now also cross-border operation. Others included product suppliers such as Maxol, local dairy, and other agri-food operators. However, all had to adapt to new realities, usually requiring a North-South separation in one form or another of their legal, management and other operations.

This was consolidated over time as cross-border business became increasingly difficult to maintain, especially for middle-sized but also smaller local businesses. Indeed, operating all-island was seen by few as an opportunity to expand and grow as the two jurisdictions pursued the protectionist policies of the era and went their own way economically (apart from those who engaged in smuggling to avoid the official controls).

In the late 1960s, cross-border businesses were put under enormous additional strain by the outbreak of the Troubles. The businessmen and women who kept going during that long, difficult period are also among the 'unsung heroes' of that time. Most had been working 'below the radar' and across the border before the Troubles began. All shared a necessary and admirable personal determination to 'keep going' and continue working through it all to maintain their business and the employment it provided. The single market represented the first dawning of hope for a more helpful and supportive operating environment for these local business people.

While the North-South commercial opportunities and external operating conditions were similar for the management teams of the 'early movers' amongst European/global companies such as Coca-Cola, Cpl, Dunnes Stores,

Glen Dimplex, Lever Brothers, Smurfit Group and United Drug, it was also a new experience and a different challenge.

Pre-1998 Agreement: Early movers

Lever Brothers is a good example of why there were pre-*Agreement* 'early movers'. As a supplier of identical leading consumer brands to the island of Ireland (which, aside from some local products, were increasingly sourced from the same factories in the EU), management of the business on the island of Ireland was split, with the north running as a small subsection of a division in the large UK company.

In practice, this arrangement added complexity and, thus, cost. However, the plans to create a European single market changed how the company evaluated this operational construct. Post 1st January 1993, the corporate priority was to build on the planning and reorganisation begun in the late 1980s, to push harder into geographically coherent units that would take advantage of common product standards, less complex supply and delivery processes and the removal of financial and custom controls.

In addition, as then Lever Brothers Managing Director Shane Molloy observed at that time, the consumer markets in both parts of this island shared important similarities in terms of their structures, such as:

> *… some of the key structural and cultural aspects of the Republic and Northern Ireland are closer to each other than either is to Britain:*
>
> - *Ireland – North and South – has a significantly younger population than Great Britain*
> - *The urban-rural split is quite different*
> - [The] *population is much more thinly spread in Ireland*[7]

At that point, these local factors added to compelling companywide commercial arguments to reorganise and restructure post-1st January 1993 into one regional Lever Brothers unit that would operate across the entire island. And they overcame non-commercial arguments against creating a new joined-up and more efficient all-island operation.

Speaking to Shane for preparing this article, he suggested that those who were 'early movers' in taking this course of action were rewarded by having better businesses. Implementation required a committed personal investment, building new relationships of trust with consumers, customers and distributors in Northern Ireland.

With this focus, even greater synergies and efficiencies emerged than anticipated (through consumer and trade activation and savings on media spend). This, in turn, enabled more competitive pricing, which benefitted consumers, leading to a significant increase in market share, sales and income for Lever Brothers overall.

In other words, make normal business processes work despite the impact and legacy of the Troubles for individuals, communities and politics. An example of how the practical benefits of the North-South integration could also be made to work for a medium-sized indigenous business has been provided by Maxol. In a publication to mark 100 years of operating as "an Irish family business", it is noted that:

> *One of the greatest achievements of the 1990s was the reunification of the management teams of the 'northern' and 'southern' wings of Maxol. Although it was registered in Dublin and the 1920s and serviced all thirty-two counties, the company was often perceived as a Northern Irish entity before it split into two autonomous, self-contained units in 1935 (though subsequently) advertising campaigns had emphasised that it was a proud 'all-Irish' concern and 'purely Irish' enterprise.*[8]

The publication notes that from the 1930s to the 1980s, and being a family business with roots in the north, a "genuine bond" remained between both parts of the operation, each supporting the other through their respective difficulties. Nevertheless, as their history acknowledges: "the bond between the two sides went on the slide with the onset of the Troubles in the 1970s [so that North-South] communication … at management level was virtually non-existent by the end of the 1980s."

It also records how throughout this time, the company experienced and dealt with the difficulties created for business by the Troubles – in their case, it was attacks on their filling stations, hi-jacking of their trucks and malicious attacks on property and in the vicinity of their personnel (the company filed 40 malicious damages claims during this period). All of this only added to

and deepened the internal differences that already existed due to being self-contained operating units – such as staff, office culture, and operational capacity. Differences were accentuated by external factors, such as staff in the two offices being from different religious backgrounds.

Nevertheless, by the early 1990s the company began to consider the amalgamation of the two units to optimise efficiency, reduce duplication and increase overall profitability. The extent to which the anticipated benefits were realised is well described in their book so that by the mid-1990s:

> *As well as integrating management structures, the company coordinated its distribution, marketing, financial control and information technologies. Everything became instantly more efficient, not least the day-to-day pooling of resources, the end of duplicate jobs and the streamlining of computer and accounting systems …* [so that management and staff] *teams now mixed talent and expertise from north and south ...,* [and as a result] *the company found itself in the uplifting position of being able to absorb and adopt best practices and knowledge from each market, north and south.*

Maxol's current Managing Director, Brian Donaldson, commented on the process: "We were really trying to get one vision, one team and one plan in place."

These pioneering examples show what could and was achieved by the 'early movers'. But most companies did not immediately follow their lead, and others encountered difficulties that lengthened the duration of the process. An example of the latter is the island's largest talent solutions company Cpl. As founder and former CEO Anne Hearty recently recalled, in 1996 she opened Cpl's first office in the north but found the environment "challenging". So the move north was paused until being recommenced in 2006, and since then, the company has enjoyed considerable success serving the all-island labour market.[9]

While not all businesses followed these examples, the wider business community was acutely aware of the potential advantages. But there were considerable obstacles to leveraging them that many were unwilling or unable to take on even where the potential benefits were evident. They needed the creation by the 1998 *Agreement* of a broader framework of political stability and support on the island to support that provided by the EU single market.

What was needed for prosperity to underpin peace?

Throughout the Troubles, Northern Ireland proved to be an incredibly resilient economy as businesses continued to operate in the face of largely local challenges by solving their own problems. Then the arrival of peace presented a very different challenge: confronting the effects of global economics and global competition while recovering from the socio-economic and other impacts of the Troubles.

Amongst the business and economic policy community, therefore, there was immediate interest in and general support for Sir George Quigley's concept of an island economy. He was a tireless advocate who invested huge personal time, energy and effort in promoting the idea and further developing his thinking on it for the rest of the decade and beyond.

As the EU single market emerged, several initiatives launched and promoted the 'island economy' concept, with the declaration of paramilitary ceasefires adding significant momentum. What all of these efforts had in common was an awareness of the vital importance of ensuring that the prosperity needed to embed peace was not entirely side-lined by 'the politics' of bringing all parties to the negotiating table and overcoming the many difficulties in doing so (e.g. the breakdown in the Provisional IRA ceasefires).

Pioneering research work was also needed to validate the possible mutual benefits of an island economy and the economic policies that would accelerate its achievement. Among this period's research pioneers was Dr John Bradley, who led the Economic and Social Research Institute's (ESRI) early North-South macro-economic research work. He also led the Border Crossings research project, supported under Measure 3.1 (Cross Border Business Linkages) of the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, administered by Cooperation Ireland.

I undertook one of the research exercises, SME Cross Border Initiatives: Their Role in Developing Ireland's Island Economy, for the project. An indicator of the range of representative groups and other organisations actively encouraging cross-border initiatives at that time is provided in the acknowledgements section, which listed the Ibec/CBI Joint Business Council, Cooperation Ireland, Chamberlink, Acumen, Linkage Assistance & Cooperation for the European Border Regions – Technical Assistance & Promotion (LACE-TAP), Industrial Development Agency (IDA), Industrial

Development Board (IDB), Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU), Ulster Bank and the European Commission.

It is somewhat of a relief to note that many but not all of its principle findings, as listed in the project's executive summary, have since been successfully addressed to the benefit of SMEs and cross-border trade and business:

- *Evidence is presented that expanding into an adjacent and attractive market to secure extra sales, new products, additional capacity, new technologies, and new partners is a proven and successful strategy for enhancing SME competitiveness.*
- *SMEs undertake transnational initiatives differently to large companies and prefer networking, informal agreements, partnerships, joint ventures and the step-by-step evolution of products and markets.*
- *Although joint EU membership has eliminated the most significant administrative barriers to North-South trade, the macroeconomic and policy contexts remain different.*
- *Currently, the most important difference is that the south is achieving unprecedented growth and prosperity while the north has significant structural problems requiring urgent attention.*
- *There is a political consensus in the south that enhanced competitiveness is central to accelerated growth and the improved performance of SMEs.*
- *By contrast, politicians in Northern Ireland have not yet undertaken a systematic and thorough political review, analysis and debate on SME policy.*
- *Leveraging an acceleration in the scope and volume of SME cross-border initiatives emerges as a necessity and not a choice for creating additional jobs in the island economy and especially in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic.*
- *Trust is at the heart of every successful SME transnational initiative. Therefore, the legacy of seventy years of division and thirty years of violence is a substantial and complex barrier to a significant increase in SME cross-border activity.*

- *To remove this barrier will require innovation and a change of mindset by many SME owner/managers, along with important changes in the detail of how they are supported, encouraged and assisted by public policies and funding programmes.*

These findings were informed in particular by the work of Geoff MacEnroe of Ibec and William Poole of CBI NI, who, under the auspices of both organisations, Joint Business Council (JBC) were joint directors of the Ibec-CBI North-South Business Development Programme. On behalf of the wider business community, they were scoping the policies needed to address the challenges presented for companies and how operating all-island helped to do so.

Concluding their essay "Two Plus Two Makes More Than Four" in *Border Crossings: Developing Ireland's Island Economy* they summarise what was needed:

> *Strategic plans on both sides of the border for generating economic growth should be coordinated in order to identify and maximise areas of common interest. Increased North-South trade, greater interaction between indigenous and foreign-owned companies and acquisitions and joint ventures on and off the island will all lead to economies of scale and greater international competitiveness. These developments will also lead to an expansion of the manufacturing base on the island. Future prosperity for this island will be closely linked to using the skills of a growing labour force, north and south.*

However, they went on to note challenges that considerable progress has been made to overcome yet continue to feature in many North-South policy discussions:

> *There is still a great deal of work to be done if this vision of the future is to become a reality. Many psychological barriers have still to be removed and will only disappear over time. Developing cross-border trade in manufactured products is seen as an important element in maximising growth and prosperity and raising living standards on the island of Ireland.*[10]

As practical support for this work, they also argued for creating new structures to support North-South expansion, especially by SMEs. Creating the trade and business development body InterTradeIreland as one of the

six new cross-border entities established under strand two of the *Agreement* covering North-South cooperation was a recognition of and response to this need.

Examples of supporting pre-Agreement business development

Two official North-South initiatives delivered substantive tangible and long-term economic benefits during that period.

The first was the Irish government's backing for a Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor with the capital investment needed to significantly improve connectivity between the island's two largest urban conurbations. This saw the completion of a motorway/dual carriageway between both places and the introduction of a dedicated 'enterprise' rail service operated jointly by Translink and Irish Rail. Combined, they transformed the ease of travel between the island's two largest urban areas and put the potential in place to do a lot more business in and between both.

The second was the 1995 White House Investment Conference initiated and presided over by President Bill Clinton. Political, business and civic society representatives from both sides of the border and other stakeholders were invited to Washington DC, for two days of meetings and briefings with US counterparts. And with only one bar in the hotel, an exceptional degree of 'cross-community' mixing was also facilitated!

Crucially, with this conference, the US government sent a clear and committed strategic signal to US businesses that it prioritised securing peace in Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland, thereby making it a 'safe' location for companies to consider investing in. This was also a helpful message when promoting the Republic as attractive to corporations seeking places to expand in a post-Cold War era of 'global trade'.

Within Northern Ireland, considerable efforts were also being made to accelerate economic development. For example, Social Democrat and Labour Party (SDLP) founder and leader John Hume brought US investment to the north, especially in his native city of Derry/Londonderry. He had particular success with Seagate, which is still amongst the city's leading businesses. And down the road in Strabane, which in the early 1970s had the highest unemployment level in the UK, companies such as O'Neill's were booming.

In Newry, local business leaders such as Fergal McCormack and Conor Patterson worked hard to achieve a similar goal; it would no longer be an 'unemployment black spot'. Founded by Brian Conlon, a true FinTech pioneer, the locally-based but internationally focussed financial services company First Derivatives was transformational in helping to bring about a similar change there.

Meanwhile, in Belfast, businesses sought to take advantage of the ceasefires and get back into growth mode. Amongst those leading the way were Howard Hastings and his Hastings Hotel Group, whose Europa Hotel had been kept open and operating throughout the Troubles. Belfast Harbour Authority quickly saw opportunities to provide port services to a recovering economy and develop the extensive port estate. The dynamic development that followed included establishing the Titanic Centre and repurposing existing buildings as film sets, notably for filming *Game of Thrones*.

In the wake of the White House Investment Conference, there was interest in establishing operations in Northern Ireland. An early mover was Allstate Corporation, one of the US's largest property and liability insurance companies and a Forbes 100 company. It was established in 1998 in Belfast to support its parent company through technology, data, cybersecurity and finance services. In doing so, it helped bring these leading-edge capabilities to Belfast, which today has 2,400 employees across Northern Ireland, a scale of employment unimaginable in the late 1980s/early 1990s.

Conclusion

During the 1990s and ahead of the *Agreement,* early mover businesses took advantage of opportunities to expand and grow by leveraging the island's benefits of scale and proximity created by the new Europe-wide single market. The paramilitary ceasefires immensely helped, but it still took imagination, determination and personal investment for their efforts to succeed.

In that decade, the foundations were laid for economic growth that, since 1998, has contributed to peace because more individuals and businesses have been able to work closely together, trade, and build trust — this 'prosperity dividend' benefits everyone on the island.

As economist Paul Tansey concluded in his 1995 essay for *Border Crossings: Developing Ireland's Island Economy*, and myself and fellow Editor Tim

Dickson picked out for inclusion in our introduction: "Peace should not be jeopardised by the imposition of grandiose structures. Much better that border crossings be built on the firm foundations of mutual economic benefits". Paul's essay *Tourism: A Product With a Big Potential* was itself an assertion greeted with much scepticism — but how right he was.

The 21st century poses many new and considerable challenges to business and society, not least the recent COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating climate change and the return of large-scale war to Europe. But post-Brexit, underpinned by the *Agreement* and with the support of the Windsor Framework, business continues to build on these firm foundations and following the spirit, principles and possibilities first identified in the 1990s will continue to help sustain the prosperity needed to embed peace in Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland.

Endnotes

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[8] Bunbury, T. (2020) *Maxol: Celebrating 100 years – The story of an Irish Family Business 1920-2020,* Ireland: Maxol Group and Turtle Bunbury Histories.

[9] Ibec (2023) *For Peace + Prosperity Stories.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/

[10] For further reading on this period: This essay, along with the other 18 in *Border Crossings: Developing Ireland's Island Economy,* provides a wide range of perspectives, but all focus on the prosperity dimension of the pre-Belfast/Good Friday Agreement peace process.

The Healing Power of Human Connections Along the Border Corridor

Denzil McDaniel

Denzil McDaniel *was a journalist for 40 years with the Impartial Reporter newspaper in Enniskillen, his home town. He was editor of the paper for 27 years until 2013, during which time he covered events along the Fermanagh Border.*

Since stepping back from the paper, he has continued to work as a columnist and commentator.

He is also involved in cross-community, cross-Border reconciliation work, and recently edited the book "Our Shared Way of Life: Listening to Border People" with the Clones Family Resource Centre.

In her long career at the heart of local and central Government, Aideen McGinley had an early taste of being caught in the middle of divided politicians.

As a young official at Strabane District Council when Sinn Féin was in the initial stages of gaining council seats, Aideen took up her usual place in the chamber when Unionist members arrived with eight-foot-high black silo liners and proceeded to install them down the middle of the room so they could conduct business without having to look at their Republican counterparts. They also used a megaphone to speak across the physical barrier.

Recalling how the councillors had used the back of her chair to wrap the material around, she recalls: "I was caught in the middle. Literally."

The incident was somehow symbolic of the divisions between the north's two communities in the 1980s, and indeed Strabane's geographical position just inside Northern Ireland meant the town experienced the real practical problems caused by a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Strabane was Aideen's hometown, and her father, a local vet, had clients split about 50-50 between north and south. She says: "The boot of his car was divided in two, with drugs for north and south, each having its own pricing and regulations. Our house was just across from the customs [building], and we were blown up eight times. I remember British soldiers hiding in our flowerbeds in shootouts!"

In addition, one of Aideen's early jobs was across in Donegal, which meant her journey to work and back saw her stop at four to six checkpoints each crossing, to the point that she knew most of the military personnel who regularly waved her on.

Such was border life in the 1970s and 80s; bombings, approved and unapproved roads, and crossings blown up by the authorities to prevent them from being used in attacks. All this made everyday logistics difficult for people who lived there, much less cooperation on matters of mutual economic and community benefit.

"And yet," says Aideen, "people just got on with it."

In 2023, considerable contact exists along a border now virtually invisible since the *1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement* enabled two jurisdictions within the European Union to forge greater links along the border region. Indeed, there are numerous links today between north and south generally. Those connections remain despite an unsettling effect in the aftermath of Brexit.

Since the *Agreement*, the natural coming together of both jurisdictions in North-South cooperation has grown exponentially on an all-island basis to the benefit of both. Notwithstanding the sensitivities of a debate over potential constitutional change, there appears to be an acceptance of the benefits of transcending borders to improve lives regarding non-controversial matters where sharing will enrich society.

In fact, contacts across the border are probably more significant than at any time since Partition.

Firstly, there was an increase after both jurisdictions became members of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, but much more so since the *Agreement*.

A newspaper report, '*Little Interaction Between People Living North and South, New Poll Shows*',[1] was criticised by border people. It's fair to suggest that separation over a century of Partition has led to a lack of understanding between people at opposite ends of the island.

One observer told me: "The north that the south sees doesn't exist. And the south that the north sees doesn't exist either."

But it's too much of a generalisation. Indeed it's wrong to suggest that there is no rapprochement in border areas.

Further examination of the figures also featured in another headline, '*Geography Matters'* in an article that "examined whether North-South connections decreased with distance from the border".

One woman told me that the further south one goes (and possibly north), the less understanding there is of the border region; border dwellers, North-South, Protestant-Catholic and so on have more contact with their counterparts. Many live in one jurisdiction, work in another, or cross the border to socialise, play sports, visit family, and so on.

It's estimated that at least 150 official points of North-South cooperation align with various issues and interests from business, workers' rights, sport, waterways, climate change, arts and culture and much more. That's all outside of the work by the Shared Island Initiative launched by Micheál Martin when he was Taoiseach.

Organic links between communities along both sides of the border have also fostered contact. A range of formal schemes, such as the EU PEACE programmes, have encouraged the development of relationships for decades.

Similar to peacebuilding, much of the work that connected communities across the border was conducted discreetly and was ongoing for some time. Even before the 1998 *Agreement*, community leaders were working on ways to initiate projects to improve everyday lives, whether economic-based or focused on health cooperation, tourism or arts and culture.

In the context of the troubled backdrop of the 1990s, the courage of officials and other visionary people who defied the odds to imagine the advantages of links across borders, whether physically geographical or in hearts and minds, should not be underestimated.

In Fermanagh, where I worked as a journalist throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, there were 115 Troubles-related murders between 1971 and 1994.[2]

Of that total, 100 were killed by the IRA (Irish Republican Army), including 65 security force personnel. The remaining were primarily killed by the British Army (responsible for nine deaths), the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), with a further two killed by Loyalist paramilitaries.

In the early 1970s, Loyalists in Fermanagh also carried out bombings across the border in places such as Belturbet in Co. Cavan, Clones in Co. Monaghan and Pettigo in Co. Donegal.

The dark days of the conflict created borders in hearts and minds as well as a physical schism between north and south along the 300 miles of a land border.

In a recent project undertaken by the Clones Family Resource Centre in County Monaghan, borderers have been speaking about their experiences, published in the book *Our Shared Way of Life*.

Behind the statistics, many stories indicate that it's still difficult for some to move on.

The numbers of Protestants in the area have dwindled, and there's a sense of a community still feeling beleaguered. During an interview, one participant spoke about the bestowing of transgenerational trauma.

Sarah, a Protestant from County Fermanagh who had a relative killed by the IRA, says many people grew up in the Troubles who "just rolled with the punches". She added:

> *You're in survival mode, and I think it's only when you get away that you realise how bizarre it is. Many people are still living in the shadow of the past and are still carrying the trauma in their head. I think we're seeing that in the generational trauma … presenting itself in different ways.*

The book details stories of Protestants who lost loved ones and members of their community living in existential fear over those years. The book also relates stories of how the border conflict, different to that in urban areas, affected the lives of Catholics and Nationalists.

Mary, a Fermanagh Catholic, said: "My daily life was under occupation, with armed soldiers, armed UDR, armed police. I suppose I was conscious that I didn't really have very many rights. It was at their pleasure that I [could] function in my community." Mary's family home was raided regularly. "We were subjected to a lot of searches, a lot of interruptions to our daily life in so far as if I wanted to travel three miles up the road, I could guarantee to be stopped at least twice."

Another Catholic from the north, Brenda's family, lived close to the border, so they travelled back and forth regularly for work and socialising. Although residing in Fermanagh, they went out socially in Ballinamore, Leitrim, Cavan, Swanlinbar, Ballyconnell and Belturbet.

"You went out prepared for the fact that maybe you would be stopped, and you wouldn't reach your destination," she says. And because the family had a business a few miles from home across the border in County Cavan, they also had to travel across for work.

However, more than the regular inconvenience of disruption to life, Brenda recalls the "pure fear" of approaching checkpoints. She says: "Waiting for that light to go, I'd start praying the Rosary. It was mostly the UDR, even more than the British Army. … someone [always] knew you and your background; they made it known they knew you, where you lived."

Marius grew up right on the border, on the southern side, and remembers when there was much more of a sense of crossing a political boundary. He remembers a level of fear in his early life crossing into Fermanagh when you could meet the B-Specials (less commonly known as Ulster Special Constabulary (USC)) and the RUC and, vice-versa, when his uncle from the north came to visit, he would push his wife to "come home, to get up, stop talking" when it was getting dark as the B-Specials would be on the road, recalling the "intimidation" at checkpoints.

In a previous publication, Marius recalls the practical difficulties farmers on the border had to overcome. Living on a farm in Monaghan, his uncle constructed a short road, nicknamed "the Khyber Pass", to avoid a lengthy

journey when moving his cattle to another part of Monaghan, as his farm was effectively surrounded by Fermanagh land.

So, following the ceasefires of 1994, while the aftermath of the conflict focused on wider political differences, the physical scars of the conflict in the county warranted attention too.

Two organisations in Fermanagh on either side of the divide conducted campaigns in the immediate post-ceasefire years. FARM (Farmers and Residents Against Military Bases) claimed that British Army watchtowers, permanent checkpoints and military installations served no useful purpose anymore and were disrupting their lives.

Meanwhile, FEAR (Fear Encouraged Abandoned Roots) saw Unionist politicians take up the cases of Protestant farmers who had fled border farms and brought them to meetings with government ministers to seek compensation.

Under Gerry Burns's enlightened leadership, Fermanagh District Council encouraged cross-community and cross-border links, and when Aideen succeeded him, she continued in the same vein. She was the first woman to attain such a senior position in local government.

In this context, Fermanagh District Council showed foresight in forging ahead with community relations efforts, particularly hosting a peace conference in 1996. The event, Remember and Change, launched a report with the same title that aimed to build relationships and trust at a time, one might say, when it looked like an uphill task.

Aideen, then in the post of chief executive, was instrumental in Fermanagh in hosting the conference with keynote speaker John Paul Lederach, the American professor regarded as an expert in peacebuilding, conflict resolution and mediation.

Aideen explains that David Bolton chaired the Fermanagh peace partnership, among the first of its kind in Northern Ireland. All councils eventually followed suit and formed similar alliances. It brought together councillors from across the political divide, the local community, voluntary representatives, and the statutory sector to create a peace strategy funded by the EU.

Held in Enniskillen, the Fermanagh peace partnership conference saw over 200 people from across the community coming together to consider building a stronger foundation for peace.

Aideen recalls: "The EU commissioner flew in from Brussels to open the conference such was its significance, and the keynote speech by John Paul Lederach reminded us all that it's not about 'forgive and forget' but 'remember and change'." She continued:

> *In particular, an interlude produced by David Bolton to the song* 'The Island' *by Paul Brady stands out. The song had difficult connotations, but in a beautifully choreographed piece of dance by local young people accompanied by a video illustrating the Troubles aligning with the words, a very strong and poignant moment was created. When the audience, in silence, stood up and applauded, it was one of those breakthrough moments that still resonated and was a turning point for the work of building peace.*

So, under the radar, much was happening to underpin reconciliation, even before the *Agreement*. Aideen uses the term "watering the seeds of peace" in those early post-conflict days. Many of those seeds are now blooming in work, which continues to be based on human connections, as described by one writer, "the healing power of human connections".

At a difficult time, Fermanagh later embarked on a People and Place Strategy, the first local integrated development strategy in the north. From this, Fermanagh's mission statement emerged: A happy, healthy people at peace and proud of their place.

After moving to Fermanagh from her native Strabane to take up economic development posts in the 1980s, Aideen became chief executive in the Lakeland County. Pointing out that Fermanagh touched on a shared border with Donegal, Leitrim, Cavan and Monaghan – every southern border county except Louth – Aideen said: "We just couldn't ignore the fact that so much of our hinterland was in another jurisdiction."

Gerry Burns had been instrumental in forming an organisation called the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN).

"Derry-Donegal was really porous, so there were good links and great working across. Newry-Dundalk was always a strong economic corridor with

good business relationships," explains Aideen. So, ICBAN saw northern council chief executives in Fermanagh, Omagh, Armagh, and Dungannon engage with the southern council county managers in Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan and Monaghan to identify opportunities. Aideen added:

> *They were visionary people, and there were genuine discussions about* [the] *potential for the area and overcoming barriers. It's often easier for officials to get together, and it was important that councillors didn't get nervous. So, there were regular meetings, and officials worked on projects.*

Fermanagh seconded a community relations official, David Clarke, to ICBAN for six years, and the body acted as a lobbying group. Among the projects they researched was a possible East-West corridor linking the A4 road in the north from Dungannon to the N16 at Sligo.

Officials worked hard with councillors who overcame political differences to achieve real change. A critical project was the Erne-Shannon Waterway, and one councillor quipped that the fish on Lough Melvin didn't recognise a border.

There are numerous examples of organisations and individuals who worked, and continue to work, right along the border corridor.

Another of the many ventures was the Clones-Erne East Partnership, a cooperation between Monaghan County Council, Clones Town Council and Fermanagh District Council which met regularly to discuss resolving issues affecting life north and south of the border. They discussed potholes in the roads, improving housing and campaigns to educate young people about the dangers on the streets after several young people in the area had been killed.

By concentrating on bread-and-butter issues and depoliticising them, progress was made in making lives better for people. This was especially relevant to health, and in the 1990s, a partnership – Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT) – was formed. Tom Frawley, then chief executive of the Western Health and Social Services Board based in Derry, was a key figure in setting up CAWT.

Formed by the Ballyconnell Agreement in 1992, the organisation takes in 11 counties north and south along the border corridor, five in the north being Derry, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Armagh and Down.

The six southern counties included Donegal, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan, Louth, and Sligo, which, while not directly touching the border, were included as part of the hinterland. It was a collaboration involving CEOs and senior managers of health boards, trusts and organisations in the health service systems in both jurisdictions. Still, it was far from simply being a bureaucratic exercise.

From humble beginnings of sharing best practices, it has continued to have a significant impact along the border region, with one of its projects significantly entitled Putting Patients, Clients and Families First.

Until her recent retirement, Bernie McCrory was chief officer of CAWT for 16 years and central to the efforts. She said: "As far as people's health was concerned, it was about securing the best access to services for patients; this was enabled by combining the human, financial and physical resources within both jurisdictions." She recalls travelling to work in Derry from her home along the Fermanagh-Donegal border and crossing the border five times before getting to her office.

In addition, having worked as a hospital manager in Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals and later as Directorate Manager for Surgery and Critical Care at the Altnagelvin Hospital in Derry, Bernie was well-placed to understand many of the health needs of people along the border.

She recalls one project involving the North-West cancer centre. Cancer patients from places such as Letterkenny in Donegal had to go to Dublin or Galway for radiotherapy, burdening already pressurised families. When the then CEO, Quentin Coey, at Belfast City Hospital, was approached about access to radiotherapy for Donegal patients, he was highly supportive. He immediately helped to create a new patient pathway which facilitated approximately 25 people each year (each for treatment, which lasted 6-8 weeks).

Benefits included training for ambulance personnel on both sides of the border and patients travelling from the north to southern hospitals for various procedures and operations.

Another example of collaboration was paediatric, congenital and cardiac surgery which combined the scarce skill base of surgeons in both Belfast and Dublin; this meant the critical mass of both populations enabled the surgeons to maintain these specialist skills.

There were many advantages of treating both jurisdictions as a joint enterprise, as envisaged by the EU Interreg programme of encouraging cooperation between regions. Patients in Cavan-Monaghan hospitals waiting up to four years for ENT treatment benefitted from an EU-funded scheme that saw two new consultants appointed to the existing ENT team in Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry and Craigavon Hospital in Portadown. These consultants held outpatient clinics and undertook day-case surgery in Monaghan General Hospital. Patients requiring more intermediate or major surgeries travelled to the Southern Health and Social Care Trust hospitals in Northern Ireland. In common with many others, this service has been mainstreamed and continues to be delivered today.

> *Our island is so small it makes sense to utilise resources to optimal levels; it helps* […] *attract and retain staff,* […] *provides easier access to many services for patients, and the combined populations enable the further development of specialist centres.*

The pioneering work of those delivering health and social care services along the border corridor has continued to overcome many challenges, such as indemnity for staff working in the opposite jurisdiction, mutual recognition of qualifications and consistency of staff training. There is a broad recognition that using the many economies of scale through collaborative working can serve patients better.

The International Fund for Ireland (IFI), established in 1986, was another vital source of providing resources, pouring millions of pounds into over 6,000 projects across the island.

It continues to fund projects which help make human connections. In July this year, an event was held in the Glens Centre, Manorhamilton, County Leitrim, to mark the end of a five-year cross-community, cross-border project, Across the Lines. The keynote speaker was Dr Connal Parr of the University of Northumbria. His speech had a significant title: Paving the Pathway to Peace – The Role of Citizens and the Arts.

Supported by IFI, Ruth Gonsalves Moore, an experienced figure in reconciliation work since the 1990s, spearheaded the peacebuilding and engagement programme. Over five years from 2018, the programme involved discussions, workshops, courses, and events.

She says she worked with Dr Parr to shape a programme that reflected the situation along the border, working out of a southern cultural context to shape a relevant programme, looking at texts over 100 years from north and south, pre- and post-Partition as well as listening to contemporary voices and offering a way to reflect on how identity and the cultural imagination are not 'fixed' but evolve over time and space. Ruth said:

> *Our* [Cultural Conversations] *programme was a little unusual in some ways – because it's rural and border, and it wasn't always easy creating a programme that engaged people given differences* [on] *both sides of the border.*
>
> *A lot of creative and heart energy goes into making these things happen and bringing people together, and that does not always get seen.*

Ruth, who describes border people as the "connective tissue" between north and south, explained that the programme started bringing people together through shared interests in arts, culture, creativity, drama, history, heritage, and so on.

"Cultural Conversations made a more focused programme allowing for deeper conversation and reflection," says Ruth, who said she was "heartened by the buzz" of the final night with "all the ideas emerging and ways in which people want to stay in contact and explore issues further."

"That's very positive and encouraging for the future," she says.

In the feedback, a participant in the Contested Histories Initiative said: "The best thing was the very open opportunity to hear about and discuss the complex nature of our shared history."

Another comment about the Cultural Conversations programme said: "It is important to examine how often a simplistic Protestant/Catholic dichotomy is assumed when the reality is much more blurred."

The Across the Lines funding support in 2017 was a further investment 'in people and relationships'.

Reflecting on the programme, Ruth explained: "One of the underlying and motivating reasons for the Across the Lines programme was identified in an early community meeting in autumn 2017," outlining where local people discussed the challenges and needs.

They identified:

- The lack of provision in the area;
- The lack of all kinds of infrastructure, such as the cross-border railway, which negatively impacts the connectivity between the south and north;
- Relentless outward youth migration; and
- The histories and legacies of Partition and "the Troubles in and about Northern Ireland", which have left distrust, silence and ignorance in its wake.

It described the situation as "living back-to-back to each other, two communities looking in different directions" despite only 20 to 30 minutes travel time between one place and another and despite the existing all island cultural bodies.

"At this meeting, there was a strong desire to bring people together around common and shared interests," says Ruth.

The Across the Lines programme engaged 710 participants through 22 initiatives reaching at least 4,499 people through a small number of wider community events.

In closing the programme, Ruth outlined that she believed participants benefitted from the programme through "new confidences gained and the unlocking of new creativity", and broader benefits being "a deepening of our commonality along the border region as well as a deeper awareness of our diversity across the porous yet dividing borderline" while also outlining that in "some small way, the programme has illuminated the contribution an arts venue can make to peace in rural border regions; and our hope is too that we have positively shaped thinking about how to support rural border needs – into the future".

Part of the Across the Lines programme was a project with Kabosh, an independent theatre company, with a script by Carlo Gebler about the closure of the railway line between Enniskillen and Sligo.

Project leader Sally Rees says:

> *It was a brilliant opportunity to get young people together from Enniskillen and Leitrim who would never have met each other*

otherwise. This gave them focus and purpose [in] *working creatively together, but the magic happened in the time in between when they could just be together, chatting, laughing, sharing food.*

Sally, a teacher at the Enniskillen Royal Grammar School, explained that the play allowed the young students from either side of the border to find out about the history of the railway but also connected them to their past.

At the end, they revealed how each of the characters was connected to them and their families, with each character taking off their costume and saying:

I'm Nelly, the girl in the red dress on the train.

The journalist was a friend of the family.

The engine driver was my great-uncle.

The fireman's my father. He left when I was 10; I never saw him again.

Owen Maguire, an uncle by marriage.

The Huckster, he's the black sheep of my family.

I'm the daughter of Kelly, the customs man though I tend, on the whole, not to tell any people that.

We'll spare you the rest; you get the point. We're all connected to everyone you saw.

We are the people of the railway.

Sally continues, "This was the springboard for the second piece; they wanted to explore who they are now rather than look at the past. The young people didn't want to talk about the border. They are more concerned about the climate, the mental health crisis, [and] anxiety. Working on the projects gave them space to explore these issues and emphasised how much they had in common."

At the time, I was reading Ali Smith's 'Autumn'*, and the opening section All Across the Country was a really powerful … text that we used with the participants to explore the impact of Brexit. One of the lines is,* 'All across the country, people were asked to leave'*. This line*

prompted one of the participants, Lukas, originally from Lithuania but who had been here since he was four, to tell us about his family's experience of having to fill out settler forms.

While Lukas and his sister had got permission to stay, they were still waiting to find out if their mother would be allowed to. While we were working on the play, they found out she could stay – a year after the rest of the family. At the end of the play, we asked the participants to imagine what they would like the country to look and be like. And they rewrote the lines and … changed it to 'All across the country, people were asked to stay'.

" … they pulled Lukas in from the audience to join them. It was a really powerful and poignant moment", says Sally.

She continued:

If it had not been for the play, we would never have known about what Lukas and his family had to go through, and it gives us all a real understanding of the impact of Brexit. It demonstrated just how important the arts are for giving [us] *space to explore what is going on in the world and how we feel, think and react to it.*

At the very end of the piece, the young performers take off their hoodies, which were green, white, orange, red, and blue, and they said:

'I am not red; I am not blue; I am not green.' And they reveal T-shirts they had made expressing their own identity.

The final lines of the play are:

We are the children of the border.
Across borders
Without borders.

Sally finishes by saying:

Projects like this show how important the arts are as they give a space to understand the past, examine the present and consider our future, where we can see what connects us rather than divides us through the commonality of our experiences.

And while the relationships they formed may have been transient and of the moment, they have created memories [that] *they will never forget.*

We are focused on the past. We need to engage our young people politically. Some young people don't vote because the two main political parties don't represent them or what they care about.

They want a future that is full of hope and understanding. If we are going to have a conversation about what a shared island will look like, then we need to engage with our young people because it will be their country, not ours.

Indeed, the priorities of the young people, their hopes and dreams all seem a far cry from the bitterness of a divided Strabane District Council back in the 1980s.

Endnotes

[1] Leahy, P. (2023) 'Little interaction between people living North and South, new poll shows', *Irish Times*, 28 January. Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/

[2] Unwin, M. (2020) *Fermanagh: From Plantation to Peace Process*. Dublin: Eastwood Books.

Women in cooperation before, during and after the Agreement:

An interview with activist Ailbhe Smyth[1]

***Ailbhe Smyth** is a long-time activist on feminist, LGBTQ and other social issues and was the founding head of Women's Studies at UCD where she lectured for many years. She played a key role in the Marriage Equality referendum campaign, and was co-director of the Together for Yes national campaign to repeal the 8th Amendment.*

She chaired the National Lesbian and Gay Federation (now NxF) (publisher of Gay Community News) for many years. Currently, she is Chair of Women's Aid and also of Ballyfermot STAR Addiction services. A board member of Age Action and of the Women's Global Health Network Ireland, she is Patron of the Women's Collective Ireland. In 2019 she was included in Time Magazine's list of the 100 Most Influential People. She was awarded an honorary doctorate in laws by the University of Galway and is a Freewoman of the City of Dublin.

Megan McDermott (MMD): Ailbhe, you've been working in and around activism for a long time. Where do you find the magic in what you do? What makes it worth it for you?

Ailbhe Smyth (AS): What may be an even more interesting question is why, when you don't win, do you keep on doing it? Because I think that activism becomes deeply embedded in your own sense of your value and personal worth, and your own value system in the world. While I don't think at all that everybody has to do what I do, I know that for me, this really matters to my sense of self as doing, or at least trying to do, something useful. Not specifically for people like me, because I am a person who enjoys immense privilege. I'm white, I live in Ireland, in Europe. I was born and raised middle class. I have an education. I had a good job, all my life. I have huge, huge

privileges. But I am very intensely aware that that was the random luck of my birth. Really, that is something I think is so deeply, deeply unfair when I look around me and look further afield and see that others, the vast majority of people, don't have these privileges. […]

I always think back to that that notion – I mean, I started out in feminism – that women hold up half the sky and we are entitled to half the proceeds, if you like, of that sky. But I think that is also applicable to people in other situations apart from gender.

I think you also come to a point in your life where activism in a way becomes second nature. You know, somebody comes to you and says, "Look, do you see what's going on out there in Dún Laoghaire at the moment with the migrant protests? Shouldn't we be doing something about that?". You say, "Yes, totally". That you're aware that you do certain things and it leads to other insights and other contacts. I think in Ireland over my lifetime one of the great challenges has been to make those kinds of semi and informal relationships work, North and South. I haven't cracked it by a longshot.

MMD: Looking back, as Ireland moved into the '70s and '80s, what were the priorities of the women's and the LGBTQI+ movements, respectively? And what were the primary challenges they faced and the factors and ideas that shaped your involvement?

AS: Well, I got involved in feminist politics, it was really towards the end of the '70s. I didn't actually come out as lesbian until the end of the '80s. So there are, kind of, gaps. […] I was also technically working as an academic in UCD. So I began to become aware that even despite my considerable privilege, that, as a woman, I was not favoured within the system I was working in as an academic or in terms of my own personal life. Because I had got married in the early '70s, and within a six-month period, realised that marriage was not for me, definitely, and left the marriage, which in Ireland proved at that time to be a very scandalous thing to do.

So when I was quite young, I came up against the limits of what my privilege could bring me. What it didn't bring me was equality and fairness in my workplace. It absolutely did not bring me choice, options, independence, autonomy in my personal life. I began to, I suppose, really push against the personal freedom and choice, and sense of capacity to live my life as I wanted to lead it. […] It made me ill actually.

But it also enormously gave me time to think and to read and to listen out for what was happening. […] It was really through feminism that I became more political, and began to understand that you really couldn't do anything until you looked at power, where it lay, in whose hands it was, who was exercising it and how, and what kinds of systems and structures were there. And that in order to analyse that, that you needed to have some intellectual tools. But all those intellectual tools came to be through North American and European feminism, really, and quite strongly tinged with Marxist thinking at that time. […] To be aware that there were ideas and thinking in these countries that I found very fascinating, and that I could, sort of, bring into my own thinking here in Ireland.

But then also, it was a kind of radical feminist politics in the US, which didn't translate very well to Ireland, but I began to think you can't do what people do elsewhere. You have to look at what's happening in your own country, and understand why it is specifically that women are made to be so submissive, made to be so docile, so obedient and so oppressed. […] It was very clear to me by the end of the '70s that you really had to take on that huge apparatus of the Catholic Church, which was so involved in politics.

Then, at the same time, you know, I was becoming very aware of North-South relations, because I always describe my own relationship to the North as sideways-on, but with quite a lot of family connections as my mother's family is from the North, and that was still very deeply embedded in our family as I was growing up. When I left my marriage […] I met an English chap from Queen's and began a serious relationship with him […] and decided to have a child. But he lived in Belfast, I lived in Dublin. We were constantly to-ing and fro-ing between those two places.

My daughter was born in '77, so we were hitting into really difficult times, where you couldn't but be aware of the conflict. […] It was actually part of my life. But I was not directly involved myself, which is what I mean by this sideways-on relationship, which I think is not all that unusual for people from the South.

[…] After a while my daughter went to live with her dad in Belfast, and the railway line was being bombed the entire time. I mean, there was rarely a trip she made when they weren't offloaded in Dundalk, or somewhere. When she was 10 or 11, I used to put her sitting beside the nuns, because I thought that they would look after her. Many years later, she said really the shoe was

on the other foot, because the nuns would get into an awful panic and she, the 11 year old, would have to say, "Follow me!"

I suppose what I'm saying is that we often think when we talk about North-South relations, what we mean is what is the political relationship. I think all of us, both sides of this wretched border, should be aware that quite a lot of us have these familiar and personal experiences. We have these lives that are imbricated, one in the other. You know, my daughter who basically grew up between Dublin and Belfast now lives in London. Her partner is English and my grandchildren are growing up as little English children who talk about "Ireland" [*in an English accent*], and I keep saying it's called Ireland [in my Irish accent], and they say, "Yes, Ireland" [*in an English accent*]. […]

You know, I think we have to speak more about those complex lives that we have, that refuse to acknowledge the rigidity of borders. I certainly spent a great deal of my adult life, from my twenties onwards, negotiating those borders one way and another. Whether they're caused by the depths of history or by Brexit or whatever they're caused by. That we have to never, never, never give up. We always have to go on negotiating and pulling them apart and showing how permeable they are. That they are never insurmountable.

Because you and I no doubt have, each of us, crawled through the middle of them, jumped over them, walked around them, flown over them. We find ways to, I wouldn't say transcend, because I don't think you can do that: it's more, kind of, a negotiation. But that negotiation in itself is a mark of the permeability. I think, for me in my life, that has always been extremely important; that sense of those multiple connections that have actually informed the kind of person I am and the kind of politics I have, which is not simple. Never simple.

MMD: At an academic level, you were spearheading the Women's Studies Forum and later the Women's Studies Department at UCD. What was the level of academic exchange North-South?

AS: Well, that's a really very good question. In fact, because I was in women's studies and in the women's movement, my own sense was always that it was important to try to make contact with women, on various issues that we were working on, but also academically to try to reach across to see what were we doing with our programmes and our curriculums.

Also, I suppose to make those very personal connections. Some connections came through publishing a little bit later on in the '80s, because I was editor of Attic Press for a while. We worked quite closely with women who were writing in the North. Edna Longley, for example, did a pamphlet for me at one stage about something to do with Ireland and culture and whether there were two cultures or not. There were, again, those quite complicated sorts of relationships.

At some point during the 80s Monica McWilliams, who was in the University of Ulster at that time, asked me if I would be an external examiner for their programme of women's studies. I went up two or three times to be an external examiner for Monica. We had met before maybe at a conference in Britain on women's studies. That's where you would meet people from the North as well.

Of course, that meant that we were actually looking at how we were going about women's studies, because you didn't get asked to be an external examiner unless there was a sense that you were going to be in sympathy or in tune with the way in which that particular programme that you were examining was working. I think Monica, I'm pretty sure she came down and spoke [in UCD]. […]

Later, I think it might have been just after the Agreement, Marie Mulholland and myself met and decided that we really needed to do a conversation about how things worked North and South, and between North and South. I think that we ultimately did a conversation, which became an article in a magazine I was producing at the time called FM , which was feminist and a bit queer. […]

The article was called something like *The Elephant in the Sitting Room* because Marie said that that's exactly what the north of Ireland was for women in the South. I absolutely agreed with her, because I had started a series of conferences in UCD from maybe the end of the 1980s, 1990 onwards, and we would always seek to have participants, contributors from the North speaking. I always remember Pauline Conroy standing up at a conference and saying, "The quickest way to empty a room at a feminist conference in the South is to say, 'let's talk about the North'". Everybody would disappear like snow of a ditch, because women in the South, a lot of us, didn't know what to be saying about women and the women's movement and feminism in the North.

I think at that point, and maybe this was something that had been happening during the 1980s, there really came a sense that there was a difference in terms of speeds and rhythms between the South and the North. It is customary to say this was because of the Troubles: it was because of conflict in the North that the women's movement got slowed down. I don't think that's quite accurate. There was also, however, in the South during the 1980s a very severe economic recession, when a very vibrant, dynamic, radical women's movement in the '70s had become something much more under the radar in the 1980s. I and many others were very aware that we were fighting to re-radicalise the movement in the South.

I tried to do that in UCD, through the Women's Studies Forum and by inviting people to come and speak on all kinds of topics, including from the North. There was that sense of a kind of a difference in terms of the context, the issues that we were dealing with, whether they were economic or narrowly political. I think that's fair enough. But it meant that there was, in my experience – this is not the experience of everybody – there was a distance between what was happening North and South. Again, this is my own analysis – I think that that was exacerbated, unintentionally, by the growing emphasis throughout the '80s in the North, the growing focus on women, basically, as peacebuilders.

I suppose that culminated, obviously, with the Women's Coalition, which I think was absolutely remarkable and did fantastic work. But there is always a price for working with the mainstream. The price for working with the mainstream, I think – and again, I could well be speaking out of turn – was that some of the really knotty, difficult issues for feminists and specifically around reproductive rights generally, and abortion in particular, were modulated. They were moved to the side. They were not on the mainstream agenda.

You know, if there had been a really good Agreement, there would have been an agreement that abortion would have been made a right for women, North and South, for example. But there was never any question of something like that happening any more than there would have been a question of LGBTQI rights. At that stage, we just talked about lesbian and gay rights. They were never going to be centre stage. Feminist, radical feminist demands or queer demands were never going to be centre stage.

I think in the South, something similar happened but for different reasons. We got knocked back by the 1983 abortion referendum in the South, and then with economic recession that really knocked the welly out of the women's movement for a good number of years. It didn't really start to bang back again until the '90s. It took a long time for that to regain the kind of vibrancy and radical dynamism it had earlier on. […]

Of course these moments of under the radar, low-key activism, whether they were in the North because of the Troubles or in the South because of the economy, it's also because of patriarchal control and [the establishment] not really enjoying the feminist movement very much, and wanting it to be quietened down. In effect, tamping it down, and channelling it in other ways. I think it quite suited [the establishment] in some respects in the North for a lot of that feminism, not all of it – you always had Cumann na mBan and others – but a good deal of that energy for a certain length of time to be more focused into building peace. I think that has been reflected on in work since then by people like Jennifer Todd, for example.

MMD: Those compromises by the likes of the Women's Coalition, which strategically left aside certain knotty issues; was there any conversation about that between activists South and North, in terms of ambitions?

You know, I'm not sure that I would agree that explicit or even highly conscious compromises are made. I think that there is a sense in which politically, you always have to kind of follow a certain flow. That it's almost organic: that you recognise or that you know at some, maybe not very explicit, level that "this, that and the other" kinds of issues are not actually going to work very well. So they are tamped down, because you are aware that you're working in an environment which is fundamentally hostile to them. That, being the more vulnerable, the less powerful, you have to tailor your talk to fit that.

I certainly would not like to point to the Women's Coalition and say they made conscious decisions in that regard, because I would be pretty sure that that was not quite the way it happened. I don't know, I wasn't there. Just as down south, we did not decide after 1983 to go quiet for seven years or eight years. We didn't. It takes time. It took time in the South to pick ourselves up again. In the North, there was a very good and simple reason why women were, by and large, or a large number of women were going in one direction, which was that life was absolutely unbearable and that something had to be

done for women who were trying to raise families and look after men folk, and try to ensure some kind of stability in everyday and community life. So that became the priority, rather than something else. So, you know, I think it's very easy to blame. I definitely wouldn't do that at all.

However, I do think that there is an argument which has been well made about the tendency to be, first and foremost, building bridges between communities in the north of Ireland, which meant that contentious issues were left to the second rung or the third rung. I think that did happen. I think that that was, in a way, kind of channelled through groups like the Women's Coalition. But also the Northern Ireland women's rights movement took a very similar kind of line for, I think, quite a long time. I'm not an expert on this. But there was certainly a sense when we started in the South, you know, having to deal with abortion again in 1992, because of the X case, that there wasn't anything similar happening up north.

So in that regard, there were not many conversations. We did try through various meetings, I think, and they tended, certainly from my point of view because I was very involved in academic life at that time, albeit as a feminist, to happen at these more academic or conference type meetings. That was very difficult in the '80s. It happened a bit. In the early '90s it was as if things went quite quiet in many respects. There was a good deal going on, maybe there was pedalling going on under the surface. In my limited experience, there was not that much exchange. There was awareness and attempts to build up that awareness.

But it was after the Good Friday Agreement that, certainly in UCD, I began to think eventually we have to do something about North-South relations, between feminists and women generally, because I felt that I was doing nothing about it. I felt that nothing was happening in my little neck of the woods […]. That there were so many issues that we needed to tackle that were not being tackled. That we needed to confront those issues ideally on the island as a whole. I'm thinking of very obvious ones like reproductive rights, but also domestic violence and rape and poverty, where perhaps the roots of poverty were somewhat different North and South, but women were still being impacted and affected in the same kinds of ways.

Also at that time the relative absence of women from representative politics was absolutely appalling – even worse in the North than in the South. […] It was around about the mid '90s that I started looking for funding for a North-

South programme. We actually got funding in the end from the P and R [Peace and Reconciliation] funds to do a programme called *POWER*. Officially, it was something like *Politically Organised Women Educating for Representation*. But the way I thought of it was Politically Organised Women Educating for Revolution. It was agreed that that wouldn't get us any funding from anybody. Somebody said "Representation, not revolution. Representation."

It was specifically designed but very late in the day. You might be saying, "My God, you're talking about the late 1990s." I'm saying, yes! That was the way it was. Bringing women North and South together in a way to say, "What are the issues that confront us? How can we actually talk about those issues together?" What tends to happen in those kinds of situations is that you talk more about the ones where you feel there is a real commonality, without fear of running into murky, difficult, dirty political waters. That's still the case today, by the way. So those would have been waters where, if you like, both unionist and nationalist or republican women could have spoken easily with women from the South who were working class, middle class, Catholic, non-Catholic, whatever. We did try and pull it out in that *POWER* programme.

MMD: Do you have any examples of that?

I remember saying in one of the modules where we were talking about racism, "But, look, as white people, as white women, we are all racist." There was the most terrible kerfuffle. Women North and South were saying, "No, we're not! How dare she." […] What it spoke to for me was the sense that we lived these very enclosed lives in Ireland, enclosed in one way in the North, enclosed in another way in the South, and that once you moved off a very important but, at the same time, quite narrow ground of commonality, it was really difficult to establish conversations that everybody could participate in in some kind of calm and reasonable way. It seemed to me to be all the more important that we should try and do that because you learned so much. The racism issue was ultimately resolved. […]

I had experience of it just recently myself, because I had a programme last year called *Encounters*, which was bringing women North and South together post-COVID to talk on Zoom about issues that affected us. It's still very cautious. Very, very ginger. A lot of it comes, and came in the '90s, from women in the South feeling "I don't know anything about them and I'm not even terribly sure I want to know or need to know much more." In the North

it's "they could never understand what we've been through", which, by the way, I think is absolutely true.

But it is not exactly a good basis for arriving at a common understanding. Unless you try and set up the structures where you can actually do that, you have not got a flying hope of setting anything up that's really going to work and make this into some kind of unified island. […]It's when you recognise it's difficult, that you can begin to move on.

[…]You've got to push at the boundaries. Once you reach the boundary and you stay with it, and keep going and say, let's not fall at this first hurdle. Let's try and talk across this big difference in understanding or empathy or knowledge, or whatever it is. Let's keep doing that. I have never understood why programmes will be funded for a year, two years. You know, we got funding for the *POWER* programme again, but only for women on one side of the border. We were saying, "But that's not the point of the programme!" What's the point? We did it. It was a very different thing. The *Encounters* programme wasn't funded again, even though it was doing that precise thing or trying to do it. But some other kind of version of it got funded. So there is that sense that there is an acknowledgment that unless people come together to have those conversations, they're not going to happen.

So when you ask me the question what kinds of conversations were going on? There were not many, because, actually, there were not that many fora in which we could have conversations. We had to go out and create those. At that time in those programmes, I was working with great women from the North, like Joanna McMinn. There was Joanne Vance, Eilish Rooney, you know, all women who were working really hard and doing hugely interesting things. So it wasn't that we didn't have the know-how. We did. There was a lot of understanding and expertise probably on both sides, really, and a willingness.

But unless you get support structures that, in a sense, recognise the importance of that meeting of minds, meeting of lives, the opportunity to take a good look at one another and to say, there's much that connects us and there is much that's different in our histories and our contexts too: we need to talk about both of those things. I need to understand what's different about your history and your current context. But you need to understand what's different about mine, too. It's not so that we will do the same things, but so that we know who we are. Who we are is complicated. Who we are is

not all the same. Why should it be? There are many things that divide us, which I think leads me to make a comment about maybe an aspect of feminism and the women's movement in the North.

The whole issue of intersectionality in the South has been difficult. But I do think that certainly from where I stood from, say, the early 1980s onwards, there was definitely an awareness that it was not okay to simply speak as a white middle class woman. It became more complex, then, as some of us came out as lesbian and began to confuse the issue and muddy the water a bit more through sexuality. Then certainly from the beginning of women's studies there was a very conscious effort to build in understandings of racialised and ethnic differences and to tackle racism – not always very successfully, I would say – but, you know, that awareness of intersectionality was definitely there. When I say it wasn't very successful, I really mean that. It's something that we are still challenged by, and still working on because it is really difficult actually.

But in the North, I think that that whole issue of intersectionality tended definitely to have lesser prominence. I mean, there is a reason for that. It's not laziness. It's not irresponsibility. It was because the frontline was actually at home and needed to be tackled there.

But one of the impacts of that was a very fragmented women's movement, probably, but also a lesser emphasis on intersectionalities, which I think is now beginning to change. I see that certainly coming from the LGBTIQ movement. I was just looking at the notice for Belfast Pride saying, "All our feminist friends, come along and support our trans brothers and sisters," and thinking that's really beginning to come out in different kinds of ways. I think that there is a much greater awareness of the nature of racism in the north of Ireland now too, as I think there is in the South as well, although still not enough, and an awareness that that needs to be tackled by our social movements and to be part of our social movement politics.

But I think that that sense of the complexity of the makeup of a social human being, it was inevitably compressed – not so much reduced. It was compressed in the North, because there was a real frontline, which was really dangerous, which was quite fatal, which did have enormous impact on the lives of working class people in particular. Middle class people can be very lazy. That's true North and South. I would say that without any apology. I am middle class. There can be a sitting back in your own comfort. That's why I

think social movement politics are so important, which is to move people out of their comfort zone and to put the question, do you really think this is right? And watch them squirm. Nothing gives me greater pleasure. By the way, if you take that out of the interview, I'll be very cross.

MMD: You talked about the discomfort that southern women felt sometimes engaging in these conversations. I wanted to ask about the role that guilt might play among us southern women. Also, it has become a norm here in the North to be having these conversations and doing cross-community work, and single identity work to prepare, alongside a huge understanding of the idea of compromise, and what that feels like, personally and politically. And that's not necessarily the case in the South.

AS: I'm not a community worker so I can't answer that question absolutely. I think that there are levels of awareness and sophistication in community work in the South, which are remarkable.

[…] I think there is more awareness now that you can't just blunder into these kinds of meetings. That you can have these meetings and conversations, but that they need to be very carefully moderated and facilitated, so that you help people to overcome that kind of discomfort.

[…] I think it's very interesting what you were saying that there is often that feeling of people feeling guilty in the South. I think it's probably right across the board, women and men. But women are quicker to feel guilt, because we always feel that we're not meeting the mark. You know, it's that sort of imposter syndrome that the vast majority of women seem to carry with us and which needs to be pulled out of us.

It's interesting. I mean, it was the great Audre Lorde who said that guilt is a pointless emotion. It is, of course, because guilt just stymies you and stifles you. It doesn't actually enable you to do anything. I think in the South it's guilt, but I think there is shame as well, actually. […] Shame is something you have to work out what it is, how it is, how you feel. Guilt is, to some extent, more intellectual or cerebral. Shame is about affect. It is always bound up with history of one kind or another, immediate or long term.

Shame is very hard. I have often thought that there is this kind of shame face thing. "Oh, my God, we should know a bit more" or "we should care more". The reality is, and I think this was partly what was meant by the "elephant in the sitting room", that because the South was okay, we didn't know more.

We didn't really care enough. Of course, I am excepting all those amazing people who have never stopped caring and who just grew up that way or adopted it as their politics, or somehow had it in their DNA. I'm talking about the general run of us, as people in the South. And looking at the general run of our politicians, who either blundered in and did the wrong thing or else did nothing. It took a long time for them to begin to do something. Even then, it's always capable of being withdrawn.

I think we're in a very different time now. I think there is much more openness. I think that people recognise now that the centre cannot hold and that there will be change. But you know that all the polls say down south that people want a united Ireland. But when you say, "Well, what are you prepared to give up for that to be a possibility?" They basically say, "Nothing". There's no give on that. […]

You know, I have my own sense of shame. When I start off an interview with you by saying, "Look, I'm afraid I'm an imposter here because I don't really know anything about the North," that's also my saying, actually, at this stage of my life, I should know an awful lot more, particularly as my life has been so mixed up between North and South. I haven't lived there, but I've been up and down all my life and connected with people who were part of the North. Yet, I think probably I haven't cared enough.

I care more now, actually. The reason I really care about it so much now is I think the North has been through enough. I just think people have had it and want now to move on to something different, and that it's up to all of us to be part of working out what that difference is. I don't by any means have all of the answers.

For me, it just simply makes sense that a tiny, small little island on the edge of the Atlantic, which will within the next hundred years start to be flooded by that Atlantic anyway, and our coastal towns will be disappearing, we all have to stand together, to work together to try and keep this island afloat and relatively prosperous, so that everybody can live a relatively prosperous life. A happy life, I suppose. I think I really felt over the past, maybe 10 years or so, that's enough now. That's enough. People can't go on having trouble. We can't go on just standing on the sidelines saying, "Oh, we'd love that to be resolved. That would be lovely. A unified island, lovely."

MMD: How did the All Island Women's Forum come about?

The Forum came about because there was a meeting called, within the Shared Island project, which is in many ways a very laudable project and very well intentioned, but it was a meeting of women who were seen to be prominent North and South in women's groups, community groups, a couple of politicians on each side. That conversation was on Zoom at the end of COVID.

You would think we'd need a few hours. Not at all. It was granted an hour and a quarter. Whereas the youth conversation had been granted a whole day. I was absolutely incandescent with rage. An hour and a quarter for bringing women, and women have been holding this island together for so long. This is an absolute disgrace. At the end of it, I said, "Well, we absolutely need a regular, big kind of convocation or a forum or something for women to come together, and we need little groups of women meeting as well," and so on.

Within a few days, to be fair, the Shared Island people were on to me to say, "Right, so would you like to organise that?". I said, "Absolutely not. An organisation needs to organise it". But that was basically how it came about because women were being overlooked. […]

So I think that we have a lot of work to do at the moment.[…] I think that there is an eagerness to do this work, although it's hard. I think we're at a time of, you know, having to rethink and re-envision what a whole island society would look like. Also, the more difficult work is what would it feel like? What would your feelings be? That's where the trouble is all the time. It's my feelings about my flag etc. So how do we shift those feelings in ourselves?

MMD: One example of the flow of people South-North and East-West in contemporary Irish history has been women leaving the Republic to travel to the UK for access to abortion or contraceptives. One of the best examples was the 1971 Contraceptive Train. For certain issues, like abortion and reproductive rights, it has been as if our borders are extended when needed or when it has suited the state, but also, to great effect by activists filling in those gaps in services. I wondered how that North-South, East-West dynamic impacted your engagement with activism?

AS: […] It was so difficult here in the South that I think there was a tendency to fight, certainly in the early years, very much in what you could call an enclosed way, focused on the South, which I think was also true to some

extent about the North. […] There was also a realisation down south that in the '80s, as I said before, there was a kind of depression following the success of the insertion of the Eighth Amendment into the Constitution, that we were up against very, very powerful forces.

It really wasn't until the '90s, that we began to realise that, actually, we could and we should and we needed to try and fight against those forces. For various reasons, socioeconomic reasons, it took us a while to actually do that. But, you know, it was still very much specific to the South. That awareness of what was happening in the North sat side by side. […]

But there's that sense of women trekking over from the North and from the South for abortions in Britain because of the CTA, the Common Travel Area, which is absolutely crucial. When it looked as if Brexit might end the CTA, oh my God, I could immediately feel myself getting red in the face and deeply, deeply worried because women are still having to travel from the south after 12 weeks for abortions, because it's so hard to get one here after 12 weeks.

I think in that sense what I spoke about at the very beginning, of the permeability of our borders, is really important because you have the abortion pill going up north, and also, in earlier times, coming from the North, down south. So the abortion pill, has been making the border crossing for a long time now. Women have been crossing borders from the North over to Britain, from the South over to Britain and now from the North probably down south a bit more.

One of our demands in the lead up to 2018 was that abortion should be available for women coming down from the North on the same terms as it's available to women in the south. Because it's one of the very rare, universally free, medical procedures in the South, it should be available free of charge for women in the North as well. There was the joint campaigning. There were, of course, points of connection all along with Alliance for Choice, and so on, but the actual close working didn't come significantly, I think, until Repeal campaign.

MMD: Did activists from the North come South in the lead up to the '83 referendum?

AS: It's a good question. There were some, certainly. Goretti Horgan, for example, is from the South and up in Derry. There's always been to a 'to and fro' there. But I'm talking about in general, I don't think there was. […]

Of course Nell McCafferty was herself from Derry. People like Nell had very different relationships with the North than people like me, who didn't have those. So depending on who you talk to, you're going to get a somewhat different picture of that.

I think it would be reasonably fair to say that there wasn't that much joint activity. But there certainly was an awareness that nowhere on the island of Ireland was good for women when it came to abortion. It would have been difficult for us to come together, because it would have been difficult to come together to have some kind of all-Ireland vision.

The only political party that had that all-Ireland vision at that time was Sinn Féin. To be very blunt about it, Sinn Féin has only lately come to the table as regards abortion. They would have melted, definitely, like snow of a ditch had you raised it in earlier times. So, you know, it's been a long process for Sinn Féin. I'm not saying for individuals in Sinn Féin – there were always women working in Sinn Féin for abortion – but for the party, which was the big all-island party to come to that recognition. It was really because of Repeal that they had to make a move on that. It's not quite completed yet. Still more resistance in the North than in the South, I think.

I mean, smaller parties like People Before Profit are also all-island parties. People Before Profit have been pro-choice since, way, way, way back when. We hold very strongly to that, but I'm aware that we're small. So, you know, speaking about the big parties, certainly Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael, they were never going to raise their hands for abortion anyway. I mean, it was the last thing on their cards.

I think it's that sense that states can disregard borders when it suits them, and women can disregard borders, that citizens, and non-citizens actually, can disregard borders when they really need to. So if we can do it for some things, we should be able to do it for everything. There shouldn't be exceptions.

It's so interesting, if you take abortion, specifically, thinking of Britain and the island of Ireland as a, kind of, almost seamless whole, when it comes to abortion. […] That the border doesn't matter. That's not what you think of. What you think of is, God, have I got the money for the Ryanair? You don't think, how do I get through the border? That's not what's stopping you. It's your socioeconomic situation that's stopping you, or your workplace, or that you're not a citizen, or the fact that you've got three kids already. That's the same North and South.

Certainly around Repeal, I had the sense that there was a real sense of sisterhood, camaraderie, bonding. I'm very nervous about that word, sisterhood. But there was a genuine sense of this is something that we need to fight for each other, as well as for ourselves. I hadn't really seen that. Marriage equality a bit the same, actually. I think I spoke at a Pride march in Belfast very shortly after we had repealed the eighth. But it was a Pride march, and I remember […] speaking about abortion, and it getting the loudest cheer because it was recognised as a, kind of, turning of the tables. It was the South was now helping the North, and it was hugely powerful that we had actually done that.

Lots and lots of women did come down from the North to canvas, and men, just as the London Irish Repeal group was composed of women from the North and South who fought really, really hard. So that was something that gave us an opportunity to work together, actually. It still happens, I think.

MMD: As you say, some of the best and most successful examples of cooperation that have happened organically were the ones where campaigners cross the borders to campaign for each other. So whether that was marriage equality or Repeal, and in reverse for Decriminalise and marriage equality in the North. What are your thoughts on the fact that sometimes that exchange flies somewhat under the radar?

AS: That's because it's about social movement politics, and it's about people getting out and protesting on the streets and marching and holding up banners, and shouting, quite rightly, true, horrible things about governments. Therefore, governments try not to notice them. Although, certainly I think as far as the South is concerned, there was a sobering recognition that people power was capable of achieving what governments could not and did not want to even try to achieve. What they knew they should be doing, but didn't have the nerve or were too cowardly to do. That was quite sobering down south, that people power really mattered.

The problem is that it's difficult to maintain that level of commitment and passion, and you really only get it in relation to very big issues. Even then, it's not a given. You have to go out and build it. People in large numbers can't sustain that kind of level of activism, because they have other things to be doing with their lives. They have families, they have jobs, they have other interests. So, you know, in a way, you always have to look on those big campaigns as tremendous opportunities. If you are a strategic activist and a

strategic campaigner, you always have to be asking yourself, what is the added value to this campaign? […] You need to try to hold on to what that added value is afterwards, and try and maintain at least some of the connections that have been made.

I think that there were good friendships, for example, made during both the Marriage Equality and the Repeal the Eighth campaigns in the South with people in the North. We had an encounter last year between, just as an example, LGBT Ireland and the Rainbow Project in the North, who had worked a bit before but who are now embarked on a much bigger hub type project between the two. I mean, that is trying to say what's the added value? These people know one another. Let's bring them in together to see what are they going to do together. In other words, how can we support that contact, that connection. It's nearly on a kind of case by case, one by one basis that you do that kind of work. It's slow work, but it is really important.

Another one that we had was the Shankill and the Falls centres and Ronanstown [west Dublin], down here in the South. They're all women's community-based centres. They've been encouraged to develop their links, and working with the great Eileen Weir, who's an absolute powerhouse. It is cross-community work, it is bridge-building work, but it's also done from a very feminist perspective. Doing that kind of work, it's looking out for those opportunities that are the added value that come from that sense of something good having been achieved, say, down south which had a knock-on effect on the North and speeded things up.

It [marriage equality and decriminalising abortion] also made people in the North sit up and say, actually, this happened to some extent because of the South. But also, it happened because we did not put our faith in Stormont because it simply wasn't there, it was Westminster came to the rescue. So you have yet another example of borders working in funny, odd, bizarre ways. You have republican women as keen to get those rights from Westminster as a unionist woman to get those rights from Westminster, or indeed a loyalist woman.

[…] Anything to do with people and politics is always more complicated than you can imagine. So you have to imagine even further. But the thing is, you have to not let that imagining stop you from doing the practical things now, and that it is also complicated. You know, what I would be saying to some of our political parties, one in particular maybe, is that I'm with you all the way

but it takes time. Because human beings are complex people, and they're not going to jump because you tell them to jump. They will jump when you're not looking, very often. If you think about Repeal, the jump happened not because of anything government did, but because a woman died. It's being ready for those unexpected moments, those moments where emotion comes to the surface.

Those are the ones that I think, politically, we have to be watching out for always. As soon as you see emotion, as soon as you see affect, you know you're in business. […] Really, if we're looking at a united island of Ireland in whatever shape or form […] that requires an emotional move as much as an intellectual and political move. It's trying to work that part out that is extremely difficult. I don't think it comes out of anybody's head primarily. It comes about through meetings of people, of emotions and feelings pinging off one another, hitting up against one another and of the awareness that grows from that kind of emotional contact, which can then be reconnected with the intellectual and political movements, so to speak.

[…] I think it's the time for emotional understanding, you know. […] Things are shifting, people are moving with these wonderful conversations and encounters with loyalist women for example. I mean, I would never have laid bets on anything like that happening 10 years ago, five years ago.

MMD: In the current context in Northern Ireland, we are lagging behind in certain crucial areas like domestic violence legislation and strategies. The economies North-South are obviously on two very different trajectories. Across the third sector, but particularly for the women's sector, funding has been cut to pieces in the North and there's no Executive to engage with. There is always a danger of conversations, movements or campaigns being increasingly hard to facilitate when one jurisdiction is diverging or regressing from the other in specific areas. What is your view on combating that at an activism or campaign level, where the economic and political realities that people are coming from and going home to at the end of the meeting are so starkly different?

AS: Yes, that's something which has been discussed and debated at the Forum […] There are always going to be differences. Sometimes one will be ahead and the other will be behind. At present, there is absolutely no doubt that the Irish economy, accompanied by a good deal of liberal change over the past decade, means that we are in the stronger position. Our society is

working more smoothly. Not without huge problems and fissures, not to mention the cost of living increases. There's a huge housing problem and we have a growing far right here in the South. We have many problems. Nonetheless, I think that we are in a stronger socioeconomic position than the North, and that is difficult for people. There is not one answer to that. That is about working through and acknowledging and understanding the differences if you're starting to imagine what a new state would look like.

I know that what happens tends to focus on the constitution, and that's a necessity. But I think that the groundwork, the "on the ground work", has to be about something else. Which is about thinking what would give the best solutions for people to the difficulties and problems in just simply living your life? Let's try and think in terms of creating a society which tries to take the best and work with that. If there's more of the best from one place than another, it's not a competition. It's about trying to achieve the best for everybody. Of course, what constitutes the best will itself be a matter of political debate.

So you're always going to have politics involved in it, but you're saying, okay, the constitution is one thing. That is about some kind of structure. But actually, the hard work of building a new kind of society is what becomes enabled by that. You have to be getting on with that process as you are working out the constitutional arrangements. […] Let's start off with human needs first, and what it is people need not just to survive, but to flourish in their lives.

Try and pick out and work together to find ways of creating that kind of society and to see it as a tremendous opportunity for us now, and for our children and our grandchildren. Certainly, for me, it's about thinking generationally. I think that kind of work requires a great deal of patience. […] It's about having conversations like this, for example. […] About really trying to tease things out endlessly or what seems endless.

I remember not very long after Repeal. Somebody – okay let me be blunt about it, an American – saying, "Oh, my goodness. It all happened so fast." I thought, "what?". I said, "You're looking at a broken woman. 35 years, we've been at this, and 35 years before that and 35 before, and so on back to 1967." It takes time, it takes patience, and it takes imagination, and it takes feeling. It's not just about a load of, albeit elected, representatives deciding our futures. This is actually about everybody, which is why consultative assemblies of all kinds are really very important, North and South.

[…] I think, that there are big problems that we really need to sort out, like domestic violence. So you don't have to take on the entire world. You can actually do it more slowly and you bring people with you as you go. If we had referendums North and South tomorrow, I think people would actually be writing on their ballot papers, "Too soon! Too soon! Go away, come back again another day," and I think they would be right because we have a lot of ground work still to do.

MMD: What do you see as the legacy of the Good Friday Agreement in enabling and shaping all-island movements for equality and justice?

AS: Well, I suppose I would say, first of all, that we wouldn't be anywhere on speaking about an all-island *anything* without the Good Friday Agreement. So it is fundamental. The second thing I would say is that it is deeply flawed in many ways, of course. I think it left out women. You know, I'm just horrified. I think if there was a Good Friday Agreement being drawn up now, that it would be done with a much greater sense of broad diversity and intersectionality, because we're dealing with different issues now. Looking at migration and how that's going to actually increase, never mind equality issues, I think probably we would be coming at it a different way. But the point is, we wouldn't be anywhere at all were it not for the Good Friday Agreement as a foundation. But it was a foundation, and things have to change and move on from the Good Friday Agreement, which was inevitably of its time, for its time and insufficient at its time. So we need to bear those points in mind.

MMD: Do you see a new generation of activists coming through in the women's sector and LGBTQI+ sector, and is there adequate support in place for that succession planning?

AS: […] I'm very conscious just at the moment of brilliant activists in the LGBTQI space because that's where there's been a lot of pressure recently. I think they're absolutely fabulous. I say that North and South, having a small experience of seeing what's going on North and South. I think that's very remarkable. I think we see that across the island in the extent to which, unlike Britain, there has not been an anti-trans movement from feminist or lesbian or gay male perspectives. There is much more solidarity. There is also – and, again, this is true North and South – a much greater awareness of the diversity that exists and, therefore, the inequalities. […] So I have absolute faith and trust.

The one thing I would always say to community-based groups is you can trust government up to a point, but only up to a point. You have to be prepared to get out there and push for what you need. It will never be handed to you entirely on a plate. I think that the women's sectors are somewhat differently organised North and South. It seems to me there's a certain amount of depression in the North particularly in the community-based sector, because of the de-funding process. I think that a lot of very good women are working very hard to try to overcome that. It is definitely problematic. In the South, it's perhaps a little bit more buoyant.

Probably because of the differences between the two, I think it'll probably be necessary to work sub sector by sub sector, issue by issue. So, for example, the Women's Aid Federation in the North and Women's Aid in the South coming together – and that's being done, and supported and encouraged. […] Women's Collective Ireland and some of the community groups in the North coming together, the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) coming together with the Irish Country Women's Association and so on.

[…] I do have faith in that. I think that there's good leadership in the movements North and South, and I think that they are coming together as much as they possibly can, and that that will continue to grow and strengthen.

MMD: Is there a particular issue, just on that, that you'd like to see emerge in the all-island space over the next, say, decade?

AS: Look, over the next decade I think we really are going to be up against it as far as climate and environmental issues are concerned. I think they will be beginning to have an impact on the most marginalised and vulnerable people. I think we're going to see increased migration, which, again, will produce all kinds of difficulties and problems. […] We absolutely on this tiny island have to come together on that issue. […] We have to deal with the politics of that as much as anything else. I think that it requires all those of us who are activists and campaigners to be bringing to the table the skills and the understanding and the know-how and the commitment and the passion that we have for creating a better world, and for trying to ensure that people who are being stripped of everything retain their dignity.

[…] I think we're moving into a different era, when our issues about unification are actually going to seem quite small in relation to the big, global

crisis that we are facing into. I think that's no bad thing. […] It helps us maybe to put certain things into proportion in a way that we haven't had to do before. Maybe that will pull us up short, make us see good common sense and come together for truly the greater good. Not just of ourselves, but of others as well, strengthen this island and open it up to those who are in need.

I don't think that's farfetched. I think the people who don't have that ideal should be asking themselves what are their human responsibilities and rethinking where they're standing in the world, because you can't just go on standing in a position of privilege and not caring about what happens to everybody else. Down south, we didn't care for quite a long time, really, about the North.

So maybe the global crisis – and it is a crisis – is beginning now to make us understand that those days of not caring are not good enough. They're over. People talk about this being a secular age. I think if that helps us to think more about what happens to people in the everyday, that's all for the good.

Endnotes

[1] This interview was conducted by Megan McDermott (Project Support Officer, Centre for Cross Border Studies) on 26 July 2023. Preparatory research was undertaken by Hari Choudhari and Sophia Copeland (both interns at the Centre for Cross Border Studies, from Georgetown University).

Cross-border cooperation on the ground:
the example of Women and Rural Development in the border region of the island of Ireland

Amandine Blancquaert

Amandine Blancquaert *originates from the Centre-Val de Loire region in France. During her studies at Sciences Po Strasbourg she had an opportunity to undertake an Erasmus period of study at Queen's University Belfast, where she focused on Northern Ireland's political and historical context. Upon her return to Strasbourg, Amandine specialised in border studies, which led her to undertake an internship at the Centre for Cross Border Studies in 2023.*

While grass-roots women's groups sought to improve the lives of local communities in border areas throughout the Northern Ireland conflict and its aftermath, it has been argued that the focus has been largely set on ex-combatants since the ceasefires.[1]

Even if the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA) affirmed the parties' commitment to women's equality in politics,[2] hard security and constitutional issues have side-lined women's place in public life. Yet the literature bringing to the forefront women's roles during the conflict and the peace process on the island of Ireland has flourished during the past two decades.[3] Among all of these works, local community groups have been praised for their good deeds – whether in terms of empowerment, social cohesion and the improvement of living conditions for people in their areas. "Wee women's work", as it has often been called, aims to find local solutions to local issues,[4] to reduce economic and social inequalities encountered by women in border areas such as South Armagh.

Governments' disengagement is felt all the more keenly in the border region, hence the importance of local groups. Bringing local solutions to local problems was what led women in South Armagh to establish Women on Rural Development (WORD). This women's organisation was created in 1987 in the Crossmaglen area by women who attended educational courses provided by the Southern Education and Library Board. Its work was intended to benefit its members, their families and relatives, whatever their background, the community or the side of the border they originated from. In this respect, WORD worked on a cross-border basis and contributed to create a network of women's organisations in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the extent to which local organisations such as WORD have energised cross border cooperation in the South Armagh region. The first part of this article explains how women from disadvantaged rural areas on both sides of the border have mobilised themselves. The second part points out how the work of WORD's members became more visible in public life as it set up a number of new women's organisations in the border region.

1. Palliating inequalities that go beyond the border

1.1. Persistent disadvantage encountered by women in the South Armagh region

The South Armagh region is considered as a disadvantaged area, as its inhabitants must face inequalities that were exacerbated by the conflict. Before looking more closely at the region's black spots, it is necessary to explain what defines a disadvantaged area.

Firstly, inequalities are multilayered. People's experience of disadvantage depends on a multitude of factors that includes their background, their race, their age, the area they live in and of course their gender. The more variables a person holds at the same time, the more she or he would be susceptible to face difficulties and to enter a disadvantaged social group.[5]

As the group this article is focused on was aimed at women living in rural areas, and more precisely in the South Armagh region next to the border, it is important to describe the environment in which it was active. According to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), "rural" refers to settlements of 4,500 people or less. To give an idea, the proportion of the

Northern Ireland population living in rural areas was 34% in 2001 and 36% in 2020.[6] The Rural Childcare Stakeholders Group's 2008 report indicated that the population in rural areas is dispersed and socially mixed; measuring deprivation is therefore more difficult than in urban areas, where disadvantage is often more concentrated in certain neighbourhoods.[7] However, regardless of their standard of living, people in rural areas are far from services and do not benefit from a well-developed transport network. When looking at economic indicators and statistics, South Armagh is considered to be one of the most disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland.[8] Importantly, at the time of the creation of WORD at the end of the 1980s, its own inhabitants regarded this region as very disadvantaged because of a lack of employment opportunities, poor accessibility, lack of facilities and transport, the military presence and the impact of the conflict.[9]

The Troubles have impacted the life of people living on both sides of the border, as they experienced a period of insecurity, loss of trust, thus withdrawing from participation in social life. With a population of around 40,000 people, the small border community of South Armagh suffered the highest fatality and casualty ratio for rural communities on the island of Ireland.[10] The region did not have a good reputation on the island, seen as the hideout of paramilitaries, giving it the nickname of "bandit country". If in this area the border is today physically invisible, lookout posts and military bases during the conflict made clear where the separation between the two jurisdictions lay.

> *"During the conflict, you were stopped at the border. My children were going to work in Newry and they were stopped, held on the roads and kept late for their work. Danger was just constant, yeah. Then we were going out one day and a soldier was shot right in front of us on the street. There are so many incidents that, at this stage of our lives, we just want to forget about a lot of that, you know. We found it was getting pulled out of us all the time" (Eileen Stuttard, former member of WORD).*[11]

Paramilitary activism in the area had been an obvious burden upon the community, as it is also correlated to a lasting lack of economic development and investment. However, the Border Region also has a strategic economic position on the island because it is an essential route of cross border commerce. Since its creation in 1987, Women on Rural Development sought to promote the region's strengths, while making sure that the voices of rural

women in the locality were heard and acted upon.[12] This initiative was a continuation of the change in women's roles in their families and communities that took place during the conflict. Women whose husbands had been interned had to provide for their family on their own and became much more active in community groups in the 1970s.[13]

As well as having a troubled history, South Armagh is a rural area, which poses additional specific challenges, such as the lack of access to a wide range of services. Remoteness makes everyday journeys more complex, and the absence of a decent transport network impacts women's freedom of movement. Poor roads systems and public transport prevent women from participating in training and may increase feelings of isolation that are connected to mental health problems. In the research carried out under the 1988-1989 Rural Action Project on women in the South Armagh region, 76% of the respondents lived in households with either one or no car.[14] Among the respondents without a driving licence, only 72 out of 124 used public transport; long distances from their houses to the nearest bus stop and the infrequency of the service were cited as an impediment by those who did not use public transport.[15] Moreover, owning a private vehicle put pressure on household finances, and was not affordable for certain categories of population such as poor, young, elderly and people with disabilities. Women amongst these categories see their mobility restricted, just like their ability to participate in the economic and social lives of their communities. Long transport times and unsuited course timetables cause difficulties to women wanting to attend educational training (e.g. IT, office skills).[16] The example of Fermanagh Women's Network, that share the same difficulties in term of lack of transportation, is revealing as they noticed that women who have long distances to travel were less likely to attend courses.[17]

In Catherine McNerney and Desmond Gillmor's 2005 survey, one of the main reasons cited by women who were not in paid employment was the financial costs with respect to alternative care for their children or elderly relatives, transport, and loss of social welfare benefits.[18] Remoteness from services such as childcare is an obstacle to rural women's freedom of movement. The 2007 *Equality Commission Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland* found that Northern Ireland had more than half as many day nursery places as England.[19] Since distance lengthens women's travel-time to their place of work or education, the demand for childcare outside normal working hours is greater. Obviously, distance from health services is also felt to impact on women in general, and even more on those with disabilities, seeking

employment or access to education, or experiencing mental health problems.[20] As explained above, South Armagh is considered as a disadvantaged area, and a poor household is even more affected by distance since it struggles to muster resources to access services.[21]

These inequalities affect women severely in that they have specific needs that are different from men's. The place accorded to women in what are termed "traditional" societies tends to confine them to the home and prevent them from getting involved in public life. In this conception of family structure, men are the primary breadwinners while women are either full-time housewives or secondary earners.[22] Even if they choose to work full-time or part-time outside their home, they generally have to do the housework and look after their families.[23] In Northern Ireland, this image of the "family and traditional woman" is still present in rural areas where the stereotype is exacerbated. As Marie Crawley's *The Grass Ceiling: Audit of Women in Rural Areas in the North of Ireland* points out, women in rural areas were more likely to "look after home / family" than women from urban areas.[24] This factor partly motivated WORD members to propose activities and expand their network.

> *"I think we were trying to get them out of the house, away from domesticity, because they wouldn't have had interest outside their homes. We were educating a lot of them. There weren't a lot of women who had got out of the home in the 1980s. At that time, a lot of women depended on their husbands to do everything, and we were trying to maybe just give them that bit of independence. You know, to be more active in their own minds about finding out information about themselves and doing stuff. Not being afraid to do stuff" (Eileen Stuttard).*

The consequences of this traditional conception of women's roles are multiple for their lives as they tend to put their needs and desires after those of their families.

The added burden of housekeeping and their role as family caretaker reduce women's employability. There's a mismatch between pre-school provision, pursuing education or having a full-time job and childcare. Juggling childcare, family responsibilities and employment is hard and represents a barrier for women who attempt to take a job or undertake further education. For these reasons, rural women are considered a less mobile workforce compared to

men.[25] A heavy workload and a lack of flexibility from employers lead women to choose part-time work or to renounce from finding a job; they are therefore in a more precarious economic situation than men. For instance, the study carried out under the 1988-1989 Rural Action Project showed that 32% of the employed women in South Armagh who had responded to the survey were working less than 21 hours per week and 21% less than 16 hours per week.[26] Having a job is not always profitable, as childcare costs also outweigh the financial benefits of working.[27] Moreover, relying on – mainly women – relatives to supply childcare leads to the upholding of an informal system in which women's work is undervalued and unpaid, and which supposes that these women themselves give up on their work or education opportunities.[28] The Rural Action Project's research gave evidence of this tendency, as two thirds of the female carers interviewed said their caring role had prevented them from considering employment or training opportunities.[29]

Despite high levels of secondary education attainment level among women in the border region, many of them do not continue in third-level education.[30] As the *Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation* WCRP report has underlined, women's performance in schools fails to translate to better success in the labour market or in public life, and in particular for those living in rural areas, who must face additional barriers such as isolation.[31] Indeed, traditional routes in education lead girls to less-skilled and lower-paid jobs compared to men. The 1988-1989 Rural Action Project study has shown that girls who left school at an early age tend to choose stereotypical jobs that echoed the jobs of women already employed in the region, like childcare, clerical or secretarial work or hairdressing for example. If they can't access better paid and skilled jobs, they are less well placed to improve their own and their family's economic conditions. Nor do they have sufficient independent resources for their own development or leisure activities, as income in a domestic situation is stretched. Barriers to women's participation in political and public life have the same origins as the barriers to work and education: lack of flexibility, of childcare, of transport, low levels of confidence and experience.[32] Low levels of female participation in decision-making at regional and local level worsen representation of the needs of women and children. There are not enough female role models in public life that could positively affect gender equality: the absence of women in this area makes it seem like it is not for women and maintains a vicious circle.[33] An underlying problem in women's difficulties in continuing to work,

train and participate in local political life is lack of self-confidence. Inaccurate perceptions of the skills or qualifications requirements and lack of information can intimidate women to take part in activities that contravene traditional expectations and roles.[34]

1.2. How isolation brought women together in this cross-border region

The 2014 Northern Ireland Assembly scoping paper on rural isolation helped to shine a light on the link between poverty and rural isolation, and underlined that the latter could have very individual impacts, which are not automatically all negative.[35] As there are great differences between rural and urban daily lives, problems and needs, living in a rural area such as South Armagh could be seen as a constitutive element in a person's sense of belonging to a group. In this respect, Women on Rural Development gathered women that would not have met outside of this organisation to provide solutions to problems faced in rural areas, and more precisely in the Border Region.

Cross-border cooperation has been ongoing for a long time on the island of Ireland, often without being named as such. One of the reasons why people don't associate their work to "cross-border cooperation" is their conception of the border. In the 2008 Institute of Public Health in Ireland study, respondents tended to consider the border as an unimportant concept that didn't really impact their lives, undetectable and not difficult to cross.[36]

> *"When I left school, I went to work in Dundalk. I didn't come to work in the North, I just crossed the border every day. As you suggested, I never even saw it as a border. Not until the time came when it was blown up. The roads were blown up, but locals were very creative and they drove into the field to go to the other side. It didn't really create much of a hassle for us" (Patricia Buckley, former member of WORD).*

Organisations involved in cooperation on health, education, training and family support issues led women to cross the ethno-political divide and the border. Despite the existence of this border, people living in both jurisdictions are aware that they shared the same concerns about caring for families. Like Northern Ireland, rural areas in the Republic of Ireland face the same disadvantages. When examining the North West region, many studies have observed the lack of joined-up action, poor infrastructure, high levels of economic inactivity and unemployment, low educational attainment and the legacy of the economic and social problems of "the Troubles".[37] Economic

and social disadvantage, underinvestment and peripherality affect the northern and southern sides of the border equally. The southern counties next to the border are also marginalised in terms of health care services access. Although differences in funding arrangements made access to care in the North more difficult to people from the South, an estimated 20,000 people were crossing the border in 2008 to get access to the northern health system within the North West region.[38]

The Institute of Public Health in Ireland's 2008 study revealed that the Republic had underestimated the economic and social impact of the Troubles on the border counties.[39] With a particular focus on women, as their Northern neighbours, they experienced higher levels of unemployment, lower work opportunities than the rest of Ireland, and were edged out of the political system. Some of them felt that isolation was exacerbated by the border and the conflict, as security checkpoints and road closures discouraged them from visiting their families living in the other jurisdiction.

This common experience of the border during the conflict has been a connecting factor between women from the North and the South in organisations that were opened to every woman who needed acknowledgement of their trauma and support.[40] Adding to this argument, women from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have the same education needs and are eager to attend training programmes. By trying courses that they may be initially apprehensive about allows women to overcome self-confidence and anxiety issues.[41]

> *"Every woman who was with us had her voice. She mightn't have had her voice at home, but she had her voice with us. We did the Behind the Masks programme. It was people telling their story of what happened through the Troubles. That was both communities. There were a lot of southern women involved in that. That was the kind of project that allowed women to speak and be listened to" (Eileen Stuttard).*

One of the purposes of women's organisations is bringing women from heterogeneous communities together and realise they have more in common than they would have guessed if they had not met. The conflict didn't stop people crossing the border, it even led to important population movements.[42]

The personal development courses that gave rise to WORD's creation aimed to motivate women to take action to fulfil their needs. WORD was born of a

will to create a better environment for the children of women living in South Armagh. As such, WORD members participated in the 1988-1989 Rural Action Project that studied the media characterisation of South Armagh and the issues facing rural dwellers.[43] WORD's development initiatives sought to tackle rural disadvantage, in terms of lack of training, of employment opportunities, of childcare, of transport, of access to IT. The research carried out under the Rural Action Project proved there was a strong demand for women's training workshops. For instance, almost all women who were not working declared to be interested in attending courses of some kind.[44] Consequently, IT training programmes, community leadership courses and a 'Women in Leadership' programme were provided by WORD.

As the group didn't get funding in its early days, it relied on voluntary activity and without any other example of women's rural development. The group implemented its first own regeneration programme from 1988 to 1995, comprising a range of projects with very few resources. To change the perception of their region that had been built by negative media coverage during the conflict, they created a collection of postcards depicting South Armagh's local scenery. Showcasing the qualities of this area in a proactive way allowed them to raise funds dedicated to an early project: an environmentally sound community business.[45] Then, an organic garden played a part in WORD's desire to diversify the nature of economic activity in the area, while providing an income to rural women. In 1993, a country market was established to encourage local women to seek a measure of financial independence and reduce dependence on traditional farming.[46] To develop tourism in the area by creating suitable infrastructure, the group facilitated a hospitality training programme for local women who wanted to set up their own guest houses. WORD facilitated a health needs assessment, which led to its participation in a Women's Health Initiative and Rural Health Partnership.[47] Get-togethers were organised, bringing together women from the border region, to talk about their networks and building relationships. Regardless of where they came from, their background, their community, their age or their profession, they came together to find solutions to improve their living conditions in this region. This type of discussion knew no border and was open to women from both jurisdictions.

2. A bottom-up approach to cross-border cooperation

2.1. Life conditions in the South Armagh region bettered by women's personal investment in WORD

Although women's organisations' work is not at the heart of government policies, they have a major impact on the daily lives of people living in rural areas by addressing problems that remain unresolved. Women's roles in the local social life is substantial and makes up 78% of the members of voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland.[48] The success of WORD is contingent on years of voluntary commitment by women who brought their own professional and personal lives to improve opportunities for rural women in their wider community.[49]

> *"I still remember the first time I went to Crossmaglen. I had two babies. My last two children – there were ten and a half months between the last two children – and I can still see me going out to Crossmaglen with the two babies to that Time for Me class. I haven't left community development since that. Literally, I had two babies. We had a creche down the stairs" (Patricia Buckley).*

Social issues have been tackled at a practical level by helping rural women who relied on public transport by providing mobile facilities or classes in small rural locations which are easier to access. Fund-raising helped the group to give a financial compensation to cover childcare and transport costs to women who wanted to attend training courses. As Amanda E. Donahoe has detailed in her dissertation "'*Wee Women 's Work': Women and Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland*", these activities have been qualified as addressing "bread and butter issues" or "soft issues", in opposition to constitutional issues and politics with "a big P".[50] Securing basic necessities for neighbours, offering education courses for community members, and many other issues are considered social rather than political. Nevertheless, actions undertaken by women's groups should not be downplayed, as they are actively representing the needs and interests of their communities, which makes them relays of local democracy.[51] The hierarchisation of divisive politics – with a big 'P' – and 'bread and butter issues' – is rooted in the political views of women themselves, who tend to place their activities in the women's or social issues category. They dissociate themselves from politics but regret the low presence of women in electoral politics.[52]

Their committed approach to undertake new initiatives won them support from the local population and funding from charitable foundations and

government agencies. WORD applied for funding for a training and education programme that was approved under the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties. It was also supported by the Training for Women Network, the Workers Education Association, the International Fund for Ireland, and the Cadbury's Trust. These kinds of funds helped to establish a women's network for the South Armagh area. This encouraged groups from across the border to become part of a movement that brought communities of women that usually didn't mix because of differences in religion and politics. What mattered was that they were all women; being seen as cross-border was not a primary concern. It helped set up more new rural women's groups and to establish a Family Resource Centre in Crossmaglen. It also received the "Prize for women's creativity in rural life", awarded by the Women's World Summit Foundation.[53]

To help the development of a cohesive network of women's organisations in the region, a full-time worker was appointed, thanks to funding from the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust. As demand for training was spreading among women in the locality, WORD recognised the need to help them learn the skills necessary to run a group to deliver education, training and personal development courses to local women. In 2000 alone, 59 women from South Armagh completed a yearlong information technology course and most of them opted to continue training for a further level of proficiency. WORD also played an important role in the establishment of the Women's Health Initiative, a locally based umbrella group of women-focused community groups dedicated to the support of community health based projects. South Armagh Rural Women's Network was launched thanks to the engagement of WORD's members. The growth in women's activity has sustained community work and demonstrated the strength and confidence coming from collective action.[54] Since women's organisations tend to concentrate their efforts within very localised areas, umbrella organisations relay their voices in discussions at a broader level and promote women's advocacy. Besides benefiting the whole community, the activities of women's organisations empower their members themselves. Forming a group, implementing strategies, adopting a cross-border approach, seeking funding and promoting the group's activities to get more funding require specific knowledge and skills that women taught themselves.[55] Building on women's strength and capabilities encourage their belief in their own ability to meet people's needs. Enabling women to have a voice by developing their confidence to share their views and to speak out is at the heart of women's

groups' missions. Capacity-building allows women to access new opportunities and develop a sense of solidarity and greater independence.[56]

Despite a dense network of organisations and a strong commitment among women in the voluntary sector, women's organisations struggle to influence regional and even national policies, which would lead to more substantial developments. Yet, the influence of civic organisations such as WORD should not be under-estimated. As they kept growing in importance, introducing active citizenship and civic society as an element in politics was essential in the peacebuilding process that helped create the context for events at the end of the 1990s.

> *"To be honest, we were not political. We were aware there were so many different shades. Everybody was welcome. There were other people who came in and everybody worked together, really and truly, which was nice. That was a success. All members were equally valued, which I think was important.*
>
> *Even for peacebuilding, it was important. When I reflect back on it, I think we had some little role to play maybe in the Good Friday Agreement, who knows? As women, we weren't up there with the top people, but we might have rubbed shoulders with people who were" (Patricia Buckley).*

The Northern Ireland Civic Forum, established under the Good Friday Agreement, reflected that new consideration, as it had been designed to ensure that Northern Ireland's civil society could play a direct role in building peace.[57] This new structure was supposed to help women engaging in other forms of serving their communities, in having input into politics and peacebuilding.

2.2. Recognition of the role of women in the region's social revitalisation

The region has benefitted from women's organisations such as WORD, which may have initially been perceived as only aimed at women's needs, but was then seen as vital in the border region's revitalisation. These groups' "wee victories" may not have overturned the representative system, but they have nevertheless provided tools and encouraged women in the region to get closer to local politics. Although women's groups success may be recognised, the lack of substantial support devalues women's work in these organisations: because of their voluntary commitment, this unpaid work is seen – wrongly – as not needing to receive funding.

The social cohesion provided by women's organisations by bringing together women from different backgrounds, which is key in addressing the conflict and its impact, has been overlooked for a long time.[58] Projects like the Behind the Masks programme, funded by PEACE III and managed by SARWN, Kilcurry/Faughart Women's Group and SAVER/NAVER – a victims support group once based in Markethill – have promoted reconciliation and relationship-building across the border. Building respect between women of different cultures and traditions and their families was central in the programme's strategy.[59] It gave women from the South Armagh and the North Louth border region a vehicle to communicate with each other, relate their experiences, to better understand one another.[60]

Multiple examples have proved that quality of life improvement can come from women's empowerment, and reach their families, their extended families, and their local communities. Participating in civic society organisations promotes civic values, helps to bridge societal cleavages by fostering social cohesion through the development of relationships between individuals.[61] Build the capacity of women, and by extension the capacity of the whole community, increases their capacity to work with others. Networking activities carried out by women's groups such as WORD then SARWN encourage cultural exchange and socialisation between women from different areas. These activities have helped to foster a sense of solidarity across the border, as women became aware of their common lot in life. In this sense, the common conception on both sides of the border that politics make no change gathers women on projects in which progress can be seen and measured by the people immediate to the problem.[62] The role of women's organisations in improving living conditions in local areas may have been acknowledged, but their entitlement to be involved in decision-making is less easy to realise. However, the growth in women's self-confidence that resulted from capacity-building delivered by women's groups may have fostered vertical cohesion and women's engagement with political institutions.

Indeed, the work of WORD is indicative of a gradual evolution in the collective representation of women's place in society. At the time of the 1988-1989 Rural Action Project study, there was a difference in the responses of younger and older women, when asked whether women should work outside the home if work was available. While among the middle-aged women, 11% said 'no', 38% of the pension-aged women thought women with young children should stay at home. As time has passed, however, fewer women think they

should stay at home, giving up professional opportunities in favour of housework. This tendency is even more visible when compared to secondary school girls, of whom 74% thought that women with children should work outside the home, whereas 47% of middle-aged women thought so.[63] A generational difference in attitude can be seen and was confirmed in the interview with Patricia and Eileen.

> *"Groups are generational, our generation's gone. There's young people coming up. They still need to continue working with younger women. We did have a younger women's group at one stage. Generations, it has to be generational.*
>
> *The next generation has to continue it. But they're not just as tied to the house or to domesticity as ours, not even us […]. I think the generations, they're out and about and working. Transport has changed. The way of living has changed. Today they are away from home and can travel, and everyone has their own car. So they don't feel that is as important for them, to get out, because they are out and about. They're not looking at it from the same perspective we were looking at it" (Eileen Stuttard).*

As they underlined it, the new generation faces different problems to those faced by the founding members of WORD. Objectives and means have changed, but women's organisations' priorities remain unaltered.

Conclusion

As the border regions on the island of Ireland faces specific problems, inherent to remoteness and a gap of investment compared to other regions that was often induced by a troubled history, people living there are more vulnerable to inequalities. As these areas have long been neglected by government policies, it is vital to look at the role of civil society, and in particular the colossal work carried out by community groups. Women's groups, such as WORD, have revitalised these border regions and benefited the entire population. They have also enabled better economic, social and public integration of women, whose traditional space was limited to the home. An improvement of women's and their communities' quality of life has been highlighted throughout the study of women's personal investment in the creation and development of WORD. This group was at the core of a flourishing network of women's organisations in the South Armagh region, and across the border. As it kept contact with women's groups from the

Republic and its activities involved women coming from the South, this group furthered cross-border cooperation at a micro level. They are essential to local democratic life and cross-border cooperation, since they account for a large proportion of north-south exchanges. The impact of grassroot groups is often underestimated, even though they are bringing many changes at regional level. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the emergence of WORD coincides with a growing international interest in women's rights and political underrepresentation, as conventions have been signed to identify and curb discrimination against women around the world.[64] These international instruments influenced other agreements and the domestic law of signatory countries, such as the United Kingdom. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 that came into force on 1st of January 2000, promotes in its Section 75 and Schedule 9 "equality of opportunity […] between men and women generally".[65] If this legislative progress gave visibility to problems that women are faced with, its success is relative, since inequalities are far from having disappeared on the ground.

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[3] See for example Donahoe, A. E. (2013).

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[6] Northern Ireland Mid-Year Population Estimates 2020 at Small Area Level, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency: November 2020

[7] McLaughlin, H. for the WCRP. (March 2009) citing the 2008 Rural Childcare Stakeholders Group report.

[8] See NISRA, Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017 (NIMDM2017), https://www.nisra.gov.uk/

[9] Kilmurray, A. (1991).

[10] See Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN), Number of people killed due to the conflict in Northern Ireland, by year (1969-2001), at SOA (Small Output Area), https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/

[11] This quote is taken from an interview of Eileen Stuttard and Patricia Buckley undertaken by Amandine Blancquaert and Anthony Soares (Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies) on 19 July 2023.

[12] W.O.R.D : Providing a Voice for the Women of South Armagh (2001).

[13] Donahoe, A. E. (2013).

[14] Kilmurray, A. (1991).

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] McNerney, C. & Gillmor, D. (2005).

[17] McLaughlin, H. for the WCRP (March 2009) citing Fermanagh Women's Network (2 June 2008).

[18] McNerney, C. & Gillmor, D. (2005).

[19] McLaughlin, H. for the WCRP. (March 2009) citing the Equality Commission Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland (October 2007).

[20] McLaughlin, H. for the WCRP. (March 2009).

[21] A household living in poverty has income below 60% of the median income. In Northern Ireland, poor households representing 21% of the Northern Ireland population in 2011, compared 15% of the Republic of Ireland population. Allen, M. for the Research and Information Service of the NI Assembly (2014).

[22] McNerney, C. & Gillmor, D. (2005).

[23] Boydell, L., Hamilton, J., Livingstone, S., Radford, K. and Rugkåsa, J. (2008).

[24] Rural women looking after their home and family represented 14% of all women in Northern Ireland in 2006. 59% amongst all women in NI looking after their home and family were from rural areas. Crawley, M. for the WRDA (June 2006).

[25] McLaughlin, H. for the WCRP. (March 2009) citing Childcare Stakeholders Group.

[26] Kilmurray, A. (1991).

[27] Employers for Childcare's 2003 survey of over 2000 women in Northern Ireland found that lack of suitable childcare was the single most prohibitive factor for women in Northern Ireland who want to work. McLaughlin, H. for the WCRP. (March 2009).

[28] McLaughlin, H. for the WCRP. (March 2009).

[29] Kilmurray, A. (1991).

[30] Of those under 65 years, 53 percent had attended or were participating in third-level education. McNerney, C. & Gillmor, D. (2005). A higher proportion of girls (70.9%) leaves school with at least five GCSEs compared with 55.4% of boys (2004/5), and a higher proportion of girls (52.7%) leaves school with at least two A Levels compared with 36.3% of boys, McLaughlin, H. for the WCRP (March 2009) citing Government Equalities Office (June 2008).

[31] 74.9% of working age males are in employment compared with 65.3% of females. 38% of female employees work part-time compared to 8% of male employees. 83% of part-time employees are women. McLaughlin, H. for the WCRP (March 2009) citing Department for Enterprise Trade and Investment & NISRA (September 2008).

[32] McLaughlin, H. for the WCRP. (March 2009)

[33] In Northern Ireland in 2005, the average proportion of women on local councils was 17.8%. Crawley, M. for the WRDA (June 2006).

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Allen, M. for the Research and Information Service of the NI Assembly (2014).

[36] Boydell, L., Hamilton, J., Livingstone, S., Radford, K. and Rugkåsa, J. (2008).

[37] *Ibid* citing the Department of Foreign Affairs (2006) and the Special European Programmes Body (2007).

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] *Ibid* citing Harvey et al. (2005).

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] Donahoe, A. E. (2013).

[42] Conroy et al. (2005) describe a number of reasons why people moved from the North to the South during the Troubles, including 'fear of prison and arrest, experiences of internment, assassinations and violence in the surrounding neighbourhoods and persons-on-the-run'. In Northern Ireland, according to the 2005 NISRA survey, 62% of the population crossed the border for short breaks and holidays but the comparable figure for the southern border regions was 8%. Boydell, L., Hamilton, J., Livingstone, S., Radford, K. and Rugkåsa, J. (2008).

[43] The European Commission Second Anti-Poverty Programme, from which the study carried out under the Rural Action Project, aimed to identify and alleviate rural deprivation in South Armagh, West Fermanagh, Strabane and the Glens of Antrim.

[44] More precisely, there were 112 out of 119 unemployed women who thought it would be a useful facility in the area, and 54% of all women interviewed (including those who had a job) declared to be interested in attending such trainings. Kilmurray, A. (1991).

[45] W.O.R.D : Providing a Voice for the Women of South Armagh (2001).

[46] This country market gathered different types of products, such as free-range eggs, organic vegetables and home-made baking. A knitting cooperative was also established. *Ibid.*

[47] Prize for Women's Creativity in Rural Life Nomination for the 2001 Prize.

[48] A recent report of the Northern Ireland Community and Voluntary Association (NICVA) suggests that 78 percent of this sector is women. Donahoe, A. E. (2013) citing NICVA. (2012).

[49] Prize for Women's Creativity in Rural Life Nomination for the 2001 Prize.

[50] Donahoe, A. E. (2013).

[51] Rooney, E & Woods, M. (1992).

[52] *Ibid.*

[53] Women's World Summit Foundation is an international non-profit humanitarian NGO working for a new development paradigm. Created in 1994 at the Beijing 4th World Conference on Women, this prize honours annually 30 or more outstanding creative rural women and organisations exhibiting exceptional leadership in their communities.

[54] Donahoe, A. E. (2013) citing Abbott, M. & McDonough, R. (1989).

[55] Donahoe, A. E. (2013).

[56] Frost, S. & Scott, S. with the Women's Centres' Action Learning Set (2019).

[57] Donahoe, A. E. (2013).

[58] Hegarty, A. for the WRDA. (2010).

[59] Geraghty, C. for the SARWN. (June 2012).

[60] In concrete terms, the programme delivered reconciliation training and social events. 'Hands-on' workshops aimed at developing women's skills in arts, crafts and ICT. At the heart of the project was the creation of masks, that gave the opportunity to women to 'tell their story'. Hegarty, A. for the WRDA. (2010).

[61] Donahoe, A. E. (2013) citing Paffenholz, T. & Spurk, C. (2006). Civil Society, Civic Engagement and Peacebuilding. In Social Development Papers: Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

[62] Donahoe, A. E. (2013).

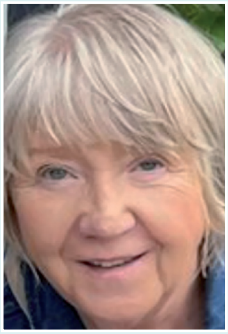
[63] Kilmurray, A. (1991).

[64] Amongst the most important : the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) of 1979; The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995, 2000 and 2005, The Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development of 1995, and later the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999 (with its articles 2 and 3) or the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (October 2002).

[65] McLaughlin, H. for the WCRP (March 2009) and Northern Ireland Act 1998.

"Throwing a pebble into the pond of peace":
Interview with Patricia Buckley and Eileen Stuttard

Researched by **Amandine Blancquaert**[1]



Patricia Buckley *from Ballsmill, Crossmaglen, has over forty years' experience of volunteering in the community sector. In 1987 she was one of the founder members of WORD (Women on Rural Development), an organisation established to articulate the voice of rural women and to help and support community-based women's groups and individual women to achieve their goals This was particularly important at the time, as the Conflict in Northern Ireland, resulted in few, if any, opportunities for rural women. Patricia's goal was and is still to inspire women, which she feels is especially important, because "empowering women, empowers communities." From WORD, Patricia, amongst others created South Armagh Rural Women's Network (SARWN) in 1992 and Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN) in 1997, both organisations continue to offer support and guidance to woman locally. Patricia is also a trained facilitator and over the years enjoyed meeting and training women from both sides of the border.*

Eileen Stuttard *spent her adult life working as a nurse. Living in Crossmaglen, she witnessed some of the darker days of the Conflict in Northern Ireland. She too, was instrumental in the foundation of WORD (Women on Rural Development) as she observed first-hand the lack of opportunities for rural women. She was also a founder member of Ard Ross Community Association which aimed to improve the quality of life and standard of living for local people. Eileen was pivotal in providing guidance and support to other nearby communities advising them on how to establish community facilities and help themselves. Eileen participated in the formation of South Armagh Rural Women's Network in 1992 which offered support and guidance to local women. Eileen continues to work tirelessly to provide opportunities for women living in rural communities on both sides of the border.*

Amandine Blancquaert (AB): Could you tell us about life next to the border in the end of the 1960s, and how you thought about crossing it? Would you describe it as an invisible border then?

Eileen Stuttard (ES): As people from South Armagh, we'd consider Dundalk as our town, more so than Newry. It's our nearest shopping town. When I was a young kid, I used to ride a tricycle to Dundalk, to shop with my mother all the time. That how it was for people living along the border.

During the conflict, you were stopped at the border. My children were going to work in Newry and they were stopped, held on the roads and kept late for their work. Danger was just constant. One day a soldier was shot right in front of us on the street. There are so many incidents that, at this stage of our lives, we just want to forget about it now. We are constantly asked about it.

Patricia Buckley (PB): When I left school, I went to work in Dundalk. I didn't come to work in the North, I just crossed the border every day. […] I never even saw it as a border. Not until it was blown up. The roads were blown up, but locals were very creative and they drove into the field to go to the other side. It didn't really create much of a hassle for us.

ES: No. You could still get to where you wanted to go.

PB: Which we did. The border, we never really saw it as a border, to be honest.

Anthony Soares (AS): So you didn't see it as a border, but it becomes a bit more visible when people or security forces start blocking them?

PB: I think my biggest dread at night was coming, let's say, from Dundalk towards my home when you'd see the red lights on the road at the border.

AS: You were talking about seeing the red lights flashing at night, without knowing whether it was security forces or not stopping you. As women, especially at night, was that hard?

PB: It was hard. I'm just thinking back to the time when we came together as a women's group and we would have met at night. I actually don't know how we did that.

ES: We didn't have that fear in us. Well, we were much younger, of course.

PB: We never let it stop us doing what we wanted to do. We continued doing what we were doing.

AS: How did you become involved and why did you think it was important then to work with women? What were you trying to do, bringing these women together?

ES: I think we were trying to get them out of the house, away from domesticity, because they wouldn't have had an interest outside their homes. Many women were housebound because of the Conflict, many missed educational and social opportunities. At that time, a lot of women depended on their husbands to do everything, and we were trying to maybe just give them that bit of independence. You know, to be more active in their own minds about finding out information about themselves and doing stuff. Not being afraid to do stuff.

PB: It was a different time from today. We wanted to empower women more. There was so little reason to be happy, it was very doom and gloom. On reflection it was a very difficult time to be living in.

ES: Because we had pressure from both sides of the community in Crossmaglen. There were the hunger strikers. Horrendous time. We used to leave with our children, to go camping, to try and get away from it all.

PB: Yes. We all went south. We all socialised south of the border.

ES: We never would socialise north of the border. Always south.

PB: Even when I was a teenager or in my early twenties, I never went to a dance or a social event in the North. I went to Castleblaney, Blackrock or Dundalk. I met my husband there. I think a lot of people on the border married people from the South, because that was where our social circles were at that time. You wouldn't go to Newry. There was nothing on anyway in the North. Everything in our area focused on the south, which I always considered our natural hinterland. I still do, to be honest.

It's difficult to say why we stayed together as a group of women. We came together at an outreach course run by the College in Newry - 'Time for Me'. There was so much camaraderie around that course, and we all felt we were the same. When that course was over, there was a reluctance to go our separate ways. I think at that time, we became aware of the existence of the Rural Action Project which was funded by the European Union. It focused on three deprived areas in Northern Ireland, one being our area South Armagh.

ES: I got involved in that project through Enterprise Ulster, which had recently come to Crossmaglen and gave employment to local people. There was a

coordinator, a local girl who was very forward-thinking and linked it up. I remember I worked through the year with St Vincent de Paul, going around and visiting old people. Then, we did a programme where we started to decorate their houses, lots of things were happening. There was another project where the parks were renovated to improve the areas.

PB: And for most women at home, transport was an issue, healthcare was an issue. It still is. I remember distinctly being totally aware that Newry and Mourne Council's remit seemed to stop at Camlough. We were out on a limb, in no man's land in Crossmaglen. It was an awareness that, you know, we deserve better than this. That really motivated us, to stay together after the end of the Rural Action Project.

ES: Brain drain. They were all going to America. My son settled and then had children there. My sister's children are all there. You didn't want your children to be getting involved in the wrong groups. I had four sons and it was very hard, living in Crossmaglen, to keep them on the straight and narrow.

PB: It was a different time. As a group of women, I think we had one objective: to improve the lives of women. I think women were the people who actually were suffering a lot, because there was so much going on with their men and their children. Maybe it was just needed. We needed to be doing something positive.

ES: When the woman in the house is happy, the house is happy. But if she's not happy, there's no happiness.

PB: We had a positive effect, I think, on families.

ES: We did. We provided something different – an outlet, something to do and somewhere to go. We did reflexology with them and we had them talking about their health.

PB: When I think back on all we did – I wonder how did we get the time? I had four children.

ES: I had seven children.

PB: Yet I still remember the first time I went to the 'Time for Me' course in Crossmaglen. I had two young babies – Irish twins! There was a creche downstairs. That was the start of a journey for me. I haven't left community development since.

AS: And women that went to the Time for Me class in Crossmaglen, they came just from around the town? Were there any from across the border?

ES: Not initially, no. Not in the Time for Me class, but later on…

PB: They would have been mostly from Crossmaglen.

ES: Crossmaglen based and from the surrounding are. There are a lot of villages. Cullyhanna, Mullaghbawn, Culloville, all that. A radius of up to 20 miles away. But we did cooperate with other groups from the south. The Blayney Blades from Castleblayney. We would have worked with them. They're still in existence.

Their leader was a nun […]. She started up a women's group in Castleblayney too, built the Íontas Centre. They were doing the same kind of things that we used to do. We used to meet them for social get togethers.

PB: My reflection is that further down the road, as you know, we did set up the network in South Armagh. There was an aspiration, I think, at one time that we would have a cross-border network, we did have a name for it: the North East Cross Border network. It never came to fruition. We eventually set up South Armagh Rural Women's Network. On reflection, it would have been good to have a cross border network. We had some association with the Western Women's Link and they were inspirational in setting up our network, we visited them in Westport and they told us their story.

AB: Could you tell us more about how you set up this network in South Armagh?

ES: We encouraged women in Forkhill to set up a wee group. In Mullaghbawn to set up a group. Belleek had a group but not Culloville. Cullyhanna Women's Group was pretty big. It's a group that's still running.

PB: You know, we managed to attract a bit of money and this helped the groups to get started.

ES: … groups in their own area. They wouldn't have to come into Crossmaglen all the time, because of transport issues.

PB: Sometimes, we managed to take the groups from other villages to Crossmaglen. It rotated, so everybody got a bit of everything. To an extent, that did happen when the funding was there.

AS: Where was the funding coming from?

PB: Well, we were lucky, we were well supported. WORD began in 1987-88 and we got funding immediately through the Rural Action Project. They obviously directed us to where to get the first funding. The first funding was

for the Development Worker. That was key, we had a worker and an office space. There were times when it didn't look as though we were going to get the funding. But we always pulled through. At the last minute, you know. We do acknowledge we were lucky. We always managed to keep the office doors open. If there was nobody there, some of us would be there until we got going again. I don't know whether it was luck or was it just determination?

ES: Then we got funding from TWN, International Fund for Ireland and NIBT. We got some money from Europe. We got little bits of funding from the Cadbury's Trust. We became involved with the WEA, who ran many of their courses locally. We sent up a branch of the Irish Country Markets in Crossmaglen – this was very successful for many years.

PB: Women seemed to be flavour of the month at that time.

ES: We were a kind of intermediate group. If some organisation had a remit to do something for women, they used to come to us. We had a good track record. We never misappropriated anything. We were upfront. All our accounts were visible. We had project workers who were very good and kept everything right […]. When we actually got involved over in the mountain, we had got into tourism. We were also involved with the Forestry Commission over on Slieve Gullion. Out of us prodding away at that, there was the development formed and there was accommodation and a purpose-built unit.

PB: We would have been quite instrumental in the development on Slieve Gullion. We knew we didn't have the resources so we managed to get a group over there of women, and they took over that. So we, sort of, let it go. We let things scale up.

AS: So when and why did WORD, which had started in 1987, become an umbrella organisation?

PB: When the Network was set up in 1997 under the name of South Armagh Rural Women's Network, we weren't in existence anymore because we had done our job. So we became one of the groups in the network. We had to go. There are four stages in the story of a group, and we were at the last stage of existence […]. Three or four other women's groups like WORD, such as the Cullyhanna group and the Mullaghbawn group agreed to continue on the network committee, but we didn't exist as a group anymore.

AS: And are you part of the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network?

PB: Yes. I'm a committee member of the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network. I'm able to bring back any information that is relevant to us in South Armagh. The reason I became involved in that was I remember a meeting we had in Crossmaglen at one stage with Bairbre de Brún. I distinctly remember her saying there will be no organisation across Northern Ireland for women. I never forgot that, because I thought we needed more than just one network. Women's voices have to be heard for the future. For it to be able to have any impact going forward, it needs to be across Northern Ireland.

AS: You were talking a bit earlier about conversations WORD had with groups in the south. How did those conversations start? How did you start linking with women's organisations in the south?

ES: Mainly the Blayney Blades and Dundalk. The Kilcurry Women's Group, that was across the border, as well.

PB: The Kilcurry association came through Majella, our employee, because of one of her best friends.[2] is from Kilcurry. That's how that association came. Sister Celine from the Blayney Blades had approached us, because part of their remit was cross-border. I do remember we had a joint health day in Crossmaglen where we shared information with them. To be honest, there were so many similarities, as there always is with women.

AB: It came up earlier on that there were lots of similarities in terms of issues for women on either side of the border…

PB: Absolutely. It was the same on both sides. As a people, we were actually quite oppressed. There was oppression and there were a lot of health issues.

ES: Their mental health wouldn't have been good. The fear for their children if they were out at night. You know, you couldn't sleep if they were out at night. The Good Friday Agreement was such a relief.

PB: I remember being worried that my daughter was the age to go to college and she was hoping to go to Belfast. I would have been so worried about her.

ES: You wouldn't have dreamt of going to Belfast. You only went to Belfast on rare occasions if it was necessary, because Belfast was so bombed. In and out through gates, searching even through parcels. They couldn't go out at night. Couldn't talk to people.

PB: We can't go back to those times. I remember speaking to Michel Barnier when he came to Dungannon to talk with grass roots groups, around the time

of the Brexit talks. I begged him to endeavour not to let the dark times come again. "Please don't let the killing start again". Because I was so worried for my children.

The fear with Brexit, about the agreement. We met at Crossmaglen. We were so worried it would jeopardise peace.

AS: What did women's organisations do around the time of Brexit?

ES: We met to discuss it, we expressed our fears and concerns to many journalists and were even interviewed by the BBC.

PB: We were fearful that the Troubles would start again. We were very fearful, because we'd been through it all before and we just didn't want to go back. Lots of other people felt the same. Still do. It was a moment of crisis.

AB: How were women's organisations working before the Good Friday Agreement, when things were really difficult in the '80s and the '90s? I suppose they would have worked on the ground…

ES: South Armagh was constantly in the news, in the press, as being bandit country. We got such bad press, we had to do something positive.

PB: We probably didn't make any difference to the press, but we tried it. Well, I always believed that what women did had a ripple effect. I believe it was throwing a pebble into the pond of peace. You went out to the sisters, the children. It wasn't just that one woman was impacted positively in that respect. It was a positive impact on the community. So I suppose we do have a bit of a legacy in that respect.

AB: Was it difficult to work with other women's organisations from the south? Were there obstacles to that?

PB: We didn't really work with that many organisations from the South. The Blayney women were easy to work with, because they wanted to be with us. The smaller group in Kilcurry came to us and we went and visited them, but there were no barriers. We didn't continue working with them, because their remit changed.

And the Western Women's group was part of a funded programme of Maynooth University. There were benefits from it, to be honest, because we learned so much about working with them in Westport. It was positive, bringing that back to our own area. But we didn't keep up that connection. Although women did come to visit us, to stay in our homes.

But after the Good Friday Agreement, we didn't keep contact with Blayney Blades. We would still have women from the south come to our programmes in Crossmaglen. Quite a few of those ladies are from the border, Monaghan and Louth area. So we don't have necessarily working relations with community organisations, but we've individual women from those areas.

AS: Do you feel that WORD worked in a way that governments couldn't or didn't want to?

PB: I don't know. I don't know whether they weren't doing it or they didn't have the funding to do it or they didn't want to do it.

ES: It just wasn't a popular thing to do, to work with women or to empower women. It just wasn't a popular thing to do at that time. It wouldn't have been on their radar.

PB: Because I think if you read back on the history of the Rural Action Project, it was European funded. It was under an anti-poverty programme, that would come into areas that were deprived.

ES: We kind of fitted their remit. Of course we were deprived. Very much so deprived in Armagh. Roads and jobs. There were no jobs in Crossmaglen for young people.

PB: I mean, at that time, border counties and Antrim as well, were a wee bit off there. This Rural Action Project, European funded was really needed. These deprived areas needed support from either council or government bodies that obviously wasn't there.

AB: Do you think that there's not been enough attention paid to the needs of communities living close to the border – on both sides of the border – and specifically women living in those areas?

PB: Well, I think there's been an improvement. But, if there isn't continued support for that, a lot of the work that was achieved would have been wasted. It needs to be continued.

ES: Groups are generational, our generation is gone. There's young people coming up. They still need to continue working with younger women. We did have a younger women's group at one stage.

The next generation has to continue it. But they're not just as tied to the house or to domesticity as ours […]. I think the younger generations, they're out and about and working. Transport has changed. The way of living has changed. Today they are away from home and can travel, and everyone has

their own car. So they don't feel that it is as important for them as it was for us, to get out, because they are out and about. They're not looking at it from the same perspective.

PB: But there's still a need for community development. I think it's key to community health. There needs to be some support for the younger people coming on.

AS: Do you think there's enough awareness or acknowledgement of WORD's – then SARWN's and NIRWN's – early work?

PB: No. I'd say they don't even know about it, to be honest. As Eileen said, everything changes. Time rolls by. I suppose people only see what's happening at the moment.

ES: People don't want to live in the past.

PB: Looking back on the things we did with WORD and then SARWN, I'm happy we did it. Very happy we did it. We'd good days and we'd bad days, and some very, very exciting days as well.

AS: As we might be going into difficult times again, don't you think it's important for people to know how the things that we have now came about?

PB: Well, I think it wasn't so much the projects, it was the process. The process was always important. It was all about being women. It was about listening to each other. It was about looking at all the options. Now, it was about knowing where we failed and it was okay to fail. It was knowing what was successful.

ES: Every woman who was with us had her voice. She mightn't have had her voice at home, but she had her voice with us. We did the Behind the Masks programme. It was people telling their story of what happened through the Troubles. That was both communities. There were a lot of southern women involved in that. That was the kind of project that allowed women to speak and be listened to.

AB: Do you think the kind of work that you were doing helped having more women involved in public life, whether it's at local level as councillors, or at a higher level?

PB: No, not as such, that was not an ambition of ours. Our work empowered women to interact more effectively with local councillors/authorities. We were never political. We were aware there were so many different shades.

Everybody was welcome. Everybody worked together, really and truly, which was nice. That was a success. All members were equally valued, which I think was important.

Even for peacebuilding, it was important. When I reflect back on it, I think we had some little role to play maybe in the Good Friday Agreement, who knows? As women, we weren't up there with the top people, but we might have rubbed shoulders with people who were.

ES: Like Monica McWilliams and May Blood. We met all those ladies. We brought people from across Northern Ireland and beyond into Crossmaglen, people that they never would have dreamt coming to Crossmaglen, because they thought it was a violent place. People still go to Crossmaglen and can't believe how friendly we are.

PB: So in a way, we have had a positive impact. I suppose we were paving the way and just doing our wee bit and building up a stronger community. At the end of the day, I mean, our story is long but it's…

ES: It's long and varied…

Endnotes

[1] This interview was conducted on 19 July 2023 by Anthony Soares (Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies) and Amandine Blancquaert (intern at the Centre for Cross Border Studies from Sciences Po Strasbourg).

[2] Majella Murphy was an employee of WORD and had been involved in women's organisations in South Armagh for some time. She would become the Director of the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network.

Archaeology of an Agreement – Bedrock and Groundwork in the 1990s

Caitríona Mullan

Caitríona Mullan *is a policy, governance and leadership specialist for cross-border and territorial cooperation. She is a senior research associate with the Centre for Cross Border Studies. Her independent portfolio includes expert work with the Council of Europe Centre of Expertise for Good Governance and the European Commission. She also holds associate roles with the International Centre for Local and Regional Development and the Association of European Border Regions.*

It is always worth remembering that the past is as complex and multifaceted as the present. In the present, we often search for the simplicity of a message from our predecessors, as if we can restore an imagined, ephemeral simplicity to affairs before us. As with the present, if we look properly, there is never one reductive version of things.

The invitation from the Centre of Cross Border Studies to write an article on the work done in the years preceding the *1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement*[1] and in particular that of the Irish 'rainbow coalition' government between 1994 and 1997,[2] came at a point in time when I was reflecting on the *Agreement* from several perspectives. Firstly, as a resident of Northern Ireland, on what was a sense of irony at the celebrations – involving the surviving political actors – to mark the signing of the *Agreement* during a week in which the Northern Ireland women's sector haemorrhaged jobs because of political dysfunction and want of a modest budget. Secondly, having worked in the rainbow coalition as a policy researcher to the then Minister for Social Welfare, I had a personal perception of the dynamics in

that period, which helped prepare over time for the 1998 *Agreement* – and I was curious to explore official records for the period. Thirdly, and in a contemporary professional sense as a cross-border development and governance specialist, I am conscious of the perceived and actual challenges and opportunities for North-South and cross-border cooperation which have arisen because of and despite Brexit, and remain concerned about the degree to which recurring paralysis of strand one has had the effect of limiting the ambition and potential of strands two and three.

In 2023, the *Agreement* itself governs much of how we live in Northern Ireland and is increasingly obscured by rhetoric full of claims of its irrelevance and even rumours of its death. In the context of the UK's exit from the European Union (EU), we have seen the rise of populist and adversarial politics which feed a far-right narrative; we have witnessed the hostilities awakened since Theresa May's deal – which would have kept all of the UK in the EU single market post-Brexit, preventing both sea and land borders for Northern Ireland – was defeated in the House of Commons with the *Democratic Unionist Party's (*DUP) casting votes against the bill. Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, but were it not for the terms of the *Agreement*, people in Northern Ireland would have been stripped of their EU citizenship overnight as a result of the Brexit referendum, which itself may well be seen by economic historians in the future to have triggered one of the most extraordinary acts of self-harm ever engaged in by the United Kingdom. Tribal animosities north and south are couched and broadcast on social media platforms in language and imagery that would have been unimaginable for the public sphere twenty years ago. In 2022, the Northern Ireland Women's Research and Development Agency highlighted that statistically, Northern Ireland has been the most dangerous place in Europe to be a woman.[3]

Yet, on the other hand – and here comes the sophistication and complexity – societies in Ireland, north and south, have moved on considerably. The Northern Ireland Executive Office in July 2023 – during a period of suspension and therefore on the action of civil service leadership – has published its *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls* (EVAWG) action plan and strategic framework for public consultation. A seat at the UN Security Council for 2021/22 marked Ireland's coming of age as a small country renowned for its particular brand of international diplomacy. Ireland is now the only English-speaking EU member state and continues to evolve as a modern and highly diverse republic. Northern Ireland has a confident electoral middle ground

which is pragmatic about how it votes from election to election[4] – arguably a modern Northern Irishness at work. The economy on the island has been transformed beyond recognition from that of the 1990s. Emerging from a global pandemic, as Europe was a century ago, we have learned a hard but constructive lesson on health status's role in economic prosperity. On an island in the North Atlantic with a rich offshore natural resource (wind energy and energy derivatives from wind, such as hydrogen) which can democratise wealth if we prevent monopolies, we know we could change the economic story of both parts of the island for good, or the best part of a millennium. In Northern Ireland, there is an emerging whole-systems literacy and practice in mitigating the multigenerational impact of trauma from conflict – a gift of knowledge, compassion and know-how that we can offer the rest of the world. Ireland has endorsed equal marriage. In both jurisdictions, legislation is now in implementation towards delivering women's rights to fully access reproductive and sexual health services. In both jurisdictions, a painful legacy has begun to be narrated around societal and institutionalised abuse of the human rights of women and children.

In considering how I might approach this article, I did two things. First, I went to the National Archives of Ireland, curious to look at the Irish state papers for those years in the 1990s that preceded the *Agreement* in 1998. Second, I kept an open mind about what article I would write.

What I found in the archives, in releases from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Department of the Taoiseach for that period, was document after document reflecting a kind of connected, internationalist, cross-border, pacifist thinking and statecraft. This was the deep intellectual capital that had gone into connecting Ireland and the UK in the context of the EU single market, of collective action concerning EU Structural Funds such as the first Interreg programme. This energy, coming from within the permanent administrations of Northern Ireland and Ireland, was from ordinary civil servants working with supportive politicians – all interested in best practices in public administration, tackling poverty and regional disadvantage, sharing resources where the whole was greater than the sum of the parts, and building economic potential in a way which benefitted both parts of the island through a vision of functionality and efficacy unconstrained by administrative borders.[5]

Christine Bell's ground-breaking book *On the Law of Peace – Peace Agreements and the Lex Pacificatoria*[6] analyses a range of 646 documents

which could be described as peace agreements, drawn from all over the world. Bell outlines the role of international law in such processes and considers their antecedents and the dynamics associated with securing them. She also identifies a stage and function classification framework for agreements,[7] which specifies three stages/functions:

1. Pre-negotiation agreements;
2. Substantive or framework agreements; and
3. Implementation agreements.

The 1998 *Agreement* and those which followed it (including *St. Andrews*, *Stormont House*, and *New Decade, New Approach*) can be classified as implementation agreements in this framework. These are dependent on the groundwork and bedrock that are the preceding stages. In terms of the 1990s, the *Joint Declaration on Peace* (known as The Downing Street Declaration (1993)) arguably falls into the category of a pre-negotiation agreement; and *Frameworks for the Future* – commonly referred to as the Framework Document (1995) – was the substantive framework on which the terms of the 1998 *Agreement* were elaborated and eventually agreed by the main political protagonists.

The following is an illustrative tour through evidence from 1990s Irish state papers of the gradual whole-systems preparation of the substance, terms and acceptability of an agreement, which characterised efforts in the years running up to 1998.[8] I have focused on cross-border cooperation, Ireland and Northern Ireland in Europe, and nurturing political consensus.

Cross-border cooperation

In November 1992, a meeting of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference in Dublin[9] had an agenda which included 'confidence issues' and 'economic and social matters'.

The confidence issues detailed include lethal force, cross-border roads, Carlingford Lough (the matter of British naval inspections of local civilian vessels using the Lough and the impact on good relations), accompaniment (the practice of officers of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) accompanying British army patrols), harassment, holding centres, parades and extradition.

The economic and social issues detailed include progress in disadvantaged areas, cross-border economic cooperation and a particular focus in this

instance on cooperation on forestry – noting the history of "good working relations between the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland (DANI) and the Forest Service", and that further cooperation should continue in plant health:

> *There exists a sound phytosanitary rationale for treating the island of Ireland as a single protected zone for plant health purposes. Both sides should co-operate closely in maintaining this position and in identifying and eliminating any threat to forest plant health on the island of Ireland.*

Noting that the previous March had seen the establishment of a North-South working group to promote trade and business development, a further note in this fiche reveals that the Northern Ireland administration "had proposed the establishment of a cross-border public purchasing development group" to explore joint North-South approaches to public purchasing, i.e. what would now be referred to as shared services models for joint public procurement. This is an interesting indicator of the appetite and thinking within the Northern Ireland civil service for public sector reform, quality improvement and efficiency and that cross-border working was understood, in some quarters at least, to be a critical enabling dimension of such reform. A further item deals with the impact of a chemical spill by Dupont on Lough Foyle and the timing of the cross-border communications and alerts which took place in its wake. A final item focuses on a North-South electricity interconnector and establishing a backup regional cross-border interconnector in the North-West between Strabane and Letterkenny.

Cross-border economic cooperation was formally framed as a theme within administrative papers by 1990. Early papers indicate discussions on the Dublin-Belfast rail link[10] and a draft scoping study from the Northern Ireland Department of Finance and Personnel on the social and economic implications of road closures along the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Cross-border cooperation on health and social welfare was being discussed in 1990, and Ireland and Northern Ireland health ministers were meeting. There was even some exploratory work done between 1987 and 1994 on proposals for North-South cooperation in the justice system – including a proposal for an all-Ireland court and discussions between Irish and British officials on a bid to introduce three-judge courts for trials on indictment for scheduled offences in Northern Ireland.[11]

Department of Foreign Affairs Anglo-Irish Division files for 1992-95 also include briefings on industrial development in Northern Ireland and detailed papers relating to the status and social inequality experienced by women in Northern Ireland. Planning discussions for the Washington Conference for Trade and Investment in Ireland, planned for May 1995, included discussions of forming better trade links between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the need for tourism development and trade in the border counties.[12]

A detailed February to May 1995 file contains multiple documents relating to the EU Aid Package: Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation.[13] The records relate to engagements made by the Northern Ireland Department of Finance and Personnel (DFPNI) to ensure a balanced update of the package across all communities and meetings made by Tánaiste Dick Spring with Teachtai Dála and senators to discuss the update of the package in the Irish border counties. It is noted in another file that on 10th June 1992, *Dáil Éireann* "unanimously adopted a motion advocating a coordinated approach between north and south concerning the next round of EU Structural Funds."

The British Irish Interparliamentary Body (BIIPB) maintained an interest in the progress being made on cross-border North-South cooperation, and the BIIPB papers for this period provide an interesting point of analysis in themselves. In September 1993,[14] a briefing memo for the BIIPB from the Irish Department of Finance focused on forming a joint structural funds programme for Northern Ireland/Ireland. In this document and its equivalent memo – within the same fiche – from the DFPNI, more than in any other sources I reviewed, there is a complete and comprehensive analysis of the spatial, economic and financial rationale for cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland. The briefing refers to the fact that:

> *The development plans for Ireland and Northern Ireland for this 1989-93 period recognised the benefits which could be obtained for the whole island of Ireland from closer economic co-operation. In preparing the development plans for the 1994-99 period, the British and Irish governments have paid close attention to the opportunities for expanding economic collaboration in the context of the next round of assistance from the* [European] *Structural Funds*.
>
> *For the two economies, the creation of a Single European Market and movement towards greater economic and monetary union and*

> *economic and social cohesion in the EC pose very similar challenges but at the same time present unparalleled opportunities. … A great deal of economic cooperation does, of course, exist and steady progress in promoting cross-border partnership has been made over the past decade.*

The document emphasises that cross-border cooperation has not been confined to the two governments and references explicitly the efforts made by CBI in Northern Ireland and Ibec

"to explore the potential for increasing trade between the north and the south ... the enthusiasm with which these private sector cross-border initiatives are being pursued is a clear recognition of the mutual benefits which closer co-operation can bring."

In the same fiche, a memo from the DFPNI to Committee B of the BIIPB[15] acknowledges the emphasis placed by both governments on the potential benefits which 'carefully directed' cross-border cooperation could bring. The document contains a litany of points and information on developments in a bilateral context, in which cross-border cooperation is referenced.

A further vignette on the matter of the changes brought about by both Ireland and the UK's membership of the EU single market is in the 1993 DFPNI evaluation report of the previous Interreg Programme,[16] which refers to the matter of a just transition for customs agents, and the need for "retraining assistance in cases where economic activities connected to the existence of a border are in a process of change, particularly the customs sector following completion of the single market."

Reading this in 2023, working on cross-border mobility, cooperation and harmonisation issues across the EU, I am struck by how in so many places, the ghosts of trade borders still stalk the open fields of an EU single market and how the solution lies with those in member states who understand what specifically can be done to improve things on their own borders.

Ireland and Northern Ireland in Europe

Policy-makers in the 1990s understood the relevance of the new European regionalism agenda – or the concept of a Europe of the Regions – for national/member states and EU competitiveness, as indicated by papers.[17]

A BIIPB document from 10th September 1993 sets out a detailed proposal driven by the five district councils of Merseyside for an Ireland/Merseyside/Northern Ireland Interreg Programme.[18] The reasons for the proposal are cited as the fact that Northern Ireland, Merseyside and the Republic of Ireland shared objective one status in EU regional performance and investment terms, shared a vulnerable economic base, had persistent unemployment, including high levels of unemployment, had an inadequate skills base, and peripheral locations with gaps in infrastructure which

"promote a peripheral image of each area relative to the economic core of Europe". The document also references inequalities in health status among the populations of the three regions.

Europe of the Regions was also beginning to contribute conceptually to new thinking on possible solutions in Northern Ireland. A speech given by British Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary Douglas Hurd at an Encounter/British-Irish Association conference in Oxford in April 1993[19] notes that: "we in Western Europe are lucky enough to have the confidence to see that states do not need to be ethnically homogeneous"; that in modernising states in a way which reflects the diversity within their populations, "we must be untidy cartographers, with imperfect maps … we must accept that the structure of those states needs some new thinking. States depend on the consent of their people. Pluralist solutions, taking many forms, will nearly always be the answer." Hurd cites Catalonia, Spain, and Brazil as positive models of regional devolution and refers to the formal recognition by their governing states of the German-speaking communities of South Tyrol, Swedish-speaking Finns of Ostrobothnia, and the *Sámi* people of Norway. Hurd reiterates a desire that Ireland and the UK work together closely as states, to renew efforts towards talks in the wake of the Warrington bombing, and to embrace difference as something enriching.

A speech by Tánaiste Dick Spring, from the same period and in the same file,[20] refers to the importance of the regional dimension of the Maastricht project and "ways in which the thinking behind the objective of a 'Europe of the Regions' could contribute to progress on Northern Ireland:" it "offered a model of how conflict could be resolved through a creative acceptance of diversity. It also offered a new framework free of the connotations of victory or defeat for either side and carrying no liabilities of the past."

A note from July 1996 on proceedings of the European Council during Ireland's then-presidency of the EU reports Spring as saying that Ireland was

"taking over at a time when the EU faced [an] exceptional challenge, including job creation, the security of citizens, moves to Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), EU enlargement and the IGC [Intergovernmental Conference]." The challenge ahead, he said: "was to translate the benefits of peace in Europe, the single market, and sound money into secure jobs and safer streets." He pledged that Ireland would emphasise employment as a theme for its EU presidency. I recall from memory that the Irish presidency of the EU also hosted vital discussions on integrating social insurance and protection for European citizens – the underpinnings of a single market that works for citizens. EU dialogue continued towards the provision now known in daily parlance as the EU social security regulation.[21] Documents for this period also evidence work undertaken by an interdepartmental committee, chaired by then Irish Finance Minister Ruairi Quinn, on taxation of cross-border workers, drawing on OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) principles of avoiding double taxation.

Nurturing political consensus

1992 saw the conclusion of an initial round of all-party talks initiated by Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Peter Brooke, chaired by Australian Sir Ninian Stephen, and focused on devolution. On 10th November 1992, the talks participants issued a statement indicating that "while there was no basis to agree a settlement, they had identified and discussed most, if not all, of the elements which would comprise an eventual settlement."

Another file contains statements from various ambassadors to Ireland, welcoming the 1993 Downing Street Declaration[22] by Taoiseach Albert Reynolds and Prime Minister John Major. Among the statements is that issued by a Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman on 21st December 1993, noting that "the joint efforts of governments and political forces and the combination of public dialogue with the technique of the quiet diplomacy made possible the first steps on the long road towards peace and accord in this long-suffering part of Europe... there are reasons to hope that striving for peace and common sense will finally triumph." In practical terms for Irish and British cooperation, the declaration marked a move to more direct communication between heads of government in Downing Street and Merrion Street, as distinct from communication channelled via the Anglo-Irish joint secretariat at Maryfield, established under the *Anglo-Irish Agreement* of 1985.[23]

A briefing note labelled confidential, 2nd February 1993,[24] refers to an informal discussion between Seán Ó hUiginn, Department of Foreign Affairs and a senior member of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), who the then party leader Jim Molyneaux had authorised to act as an interlocutor. They deliberated on the DUP's pre-election challenge to the UUP and the then Tánaiste's aspiration to engage with UUP leadership. So too, was the desire by the UUP leadership to see low-key but successful contact with Dublin and for momentum towards talks to be maintained, at risk of what would otherwise become a dangerous 'political vacuum'.

Department of the Taoiseach papers for the period 1995-1997[25] provide a detailed insight into the interaction between Merrion Street and Downing Street, including personal correspondence between the Taoiseach and Prime Minister – quite literally, a series of letters which both correspondents begin with "Dear John", and some of which are marked 'personal and private'. The correspondence and supporting documentation chart the detailed, varied discussions – some assisted by the diplomatic contribution of the then British Ambassador to Ireland, Veronica Sutherland – and meetings with each other on the fringes of other international events in places which included Cannes and Moscow.

A snapshot of summer 1995 – amidst the declarations of ceasefires by the IRA and Loyalists, the publication of the *Framework Document*, and intensified efforts by the Irish and UK governments to secure all-party talks – indicates a period of intense focus and communication between Bruton and Major on the matter of reaching a point where unionists would come to talks and Sinn Féin had consented to some terms on decommissioning; both factors being interdependent.

There is a detailed transcript of a meeting between Bruton and Major in Moscow on 9th May 1995. Both were in Moscow as First Ministers to attend the Victory in Europe (VE) Commemorations hosted by Russia, and the Moscow visit was clearly of interest to members of the Oireachtas, essentially because the Taoiseach was facing accountability for expressing Irish concerns about the war in Chechnya. A fax to Declan Ingoldsby at the Department of the Taoiseach, of material for inclusion in response to parliamentary questions, indicates that the Taoiseach raised Chechnya as a point of concern in his interactions with President Yeltsin, specifically the Irish view that ending the fighting in Chechnya should be a matter of urgency.

According to the transcript of the meeting between Bruton and Major, the discussion focused on what was necessary to bring the Northern Ireland parties to the table. The honesty of the exchanges is striking:

> Major: I wish I could see clearly into the Sinn Féin mind. Have they mapped it all out as a strategy, or is it a case of 'suck it and see' as they go along?
>
> Bruton: They seem to distinguish peace in this generation from the possibility of recurrence at some other time. Those […] involved are not of a mind to go back to violence themselves, but the question for them is the possibility of recurrence at a later time in another generation (if there is not a permanent settlement now) … I doubt they are so innocent to believe that this will result in a change in the status of the Union.
>
> Major: Yes, I agree. They are hard-headed and not dreamers.

In the document *A Practical Approach to Problem-Solving in Northern Ireland,* which is also on file, discussion follows on the chances of Unionists accepting the *Framework Document* in the context of the UUP's reaction to the leaking of the *Framework Document* and concerns expressed about the importance of democratic adherence and consent. Major indicates that he was reluctant to alter the document but reveals "they are genuinely worried about cross-border structures". Major views the Unionists' internal discussions on entering talks as a positive development and is content to let this process take its course. The discussion then turns to Russia, NATO expansion and EU enlargement.

Irish state papers from 1995 also show an awareness that a general election was approaching in the UK, coupled with Labour's evident interest in Irish affairs before the general election. A Department of Foreign Affairs secret memo from June 1995, provided for the Taoiseach in advance of a meeting with Major in Cannes, wryly remarks that:

> *Prime Minister Major will presumably want to avoid any negative connotations in his Irish agenda just now, so* […] *whatever frank signals may have to be given in private, the public presentation should be an upbeat message of close cooperation and the hope of steady progress.*

Ireland wanted to persuade the British to "move away from their present position of treating decommissioning in effect as a precondition of political talks". It wished them "instead to adopt a policy of pursuing these issues in parallel".

A further issue raised repeatedly by the Irish government in this period was that of prisoner conditions, sentence reviews, conditions for remission, and release. A meeting in Cannes in June 1995, on the fringe of the EU summit, included an agreement by the Taoiseach and Prime Minister to undertake joint feasibility studies on decommissioning and paramilitary prisoners. It is clear from sources around this time that the release of Private Lee Clegg by Northern Ireland Secretary of State Sir Patrick Mayhew had caused significant controversy. One particular letter from Bruton to Major, dated 17th July 1995, suggests that in light of the release, any non-movement by the government on the broader issues of prisoners could become a political stumbling block in future talks – particularly if seen as a tactic to try to force an IRA commitment on decommissioning. Bruton concludes with the statement: "On our side, we have decided to undertake a significant release of prisoners and improvement in conditions for others before end July." In a detailed speech to the *Dáil* on 4th July 1995 on the importance of all-party consensus on support for the peace process, Bruton indicated that:

> *… the British/Irish intergovernmental relationship has been at the heart of all the major efforts over the past twenty-five years to forge a new destiny for the Nationalist and Unionist people of this island.*

A meeting occurred on 21st July 1995 at Merrion Street between the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Minister for Social Welfare and a delegation led by Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams.[26] The objective of the meeting was to allow for a thorough and extended discussion of the peace process, and conversations quickly turned to what Sinn Féin was willing to accept concerning the decommissioning issue. There is some discussion as to whether there was an understanding in the Republican movement before the (1994) ceasefire that decommissioning would eventually become a requirement. Discussions refer to the proposal for an international commission on decommissioning, put forward by the Irish government and – significantly, emphasises the Taoiseach – agreed to by the British Government. Bruton emphasises this as a way of creating good faith on the decommissioning issue without allowing it to become a precondition with the potential to prevent the commencement of talks. Sinn

Féin emphasised the crucial importance of initiating the talks process promptly. Adams points out that if one part of the peace process is moving slowly, there is still potential to speed up other parts – in this case, movement on prisoners' issues in the Republic of Ireland. Proinsías De Rossa – a public critic of Sinn Féin and the IRA – indicates that once talks are possible, the process will take on its own momentum, and momentum then ceases to be an issue of concern. Adams agrees with this point. The meeting ends with McGuinness asking: "Can you trust the British government?". The Taoiseach responded by saying that if Sinn Féin did not, they should welcome the involvement of an international commission on decommissioning as a third party. In concluding the meeting, all sides are noted as having described it as very useful, and it is pointed out that the Irish government agreed to give a briefing to Sinn Féin following an upcoming meeting planned with Sir Patrick Mayhew.

These exchanges from May to July 1995 reflect the intensity of effort to maintain momentum in the peace process and the complexity of dynamics, as documented by one set of stakeholders. In February 1996, the IRA bombed Canary Wharf in London's Docklands, killing two civilians and injuring more than 100 people, some permanently. At the time, the temptation in Dublin was to cut off contact with Sinn Féin. However, it was decided to maintain official-level contact: earlier unpublished research on this period which I conducted, suggests that De Rossa persuaded Bruton that it would be important to ensure some contact channel remained open, if only at an official level, to avoid the gains of the process being completely lost. The period from February 1996 to the opening of all-party talks in June of the same year merits more analysis than I can afford in the context of this article. The talks opened in June 1996, albeit initially without the presence of Sinn Féin.

A lengthy speech by Bruton on 7th May 1997 to the Oxford Union provides a comprehensive overview of East-West and North-South cooperation undertaken by both governments up to May 1997.[27] This visit to Oxford coincided with the Taoiseach's first meeting with the newly-elected Prime Minister Tony Blair. The speech points out that the Irish government had, with the British government, delivered the first element of a peace plan: the launch of an all-inclusive talks process. These talks opened on 10th June 1996; all parties had secured an agreement for the rules and procedures by July 1996. Bruton refers to the planned resumption of talks for 3rd June 1997, following national and local elections in Northern Ireland. Bruton also

outlines that the two governments had agreed and launched the *Framework Document* in 1995 and established the International Group on Decommissioning chaired by Senator George J. Mitchell. He refers to the fact that the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation had reported and that the forum opportunity would be re-opened for Sinn Féin to work with all parties, north and south, "when the IRA declares a ceasefire". This second ceasefire came in July 1997, weeks after the Irish general election, which saw the establishment of the Fianna *Fáil*/Progressive Democrats coalition government led by Bertie Ahern and Mary Harney.

In May 1997, in the *Joint Statement of Intent on Cooperation Between the Irish and British Governments*, both governments agreed to intensify cooperation between them in a range of fields, including tackling long-term unemployment, consumer affairs, health and medical issues, education, culture, the environment, the fight against drugs and crime, civil law matters, processing of social security payments and measures to combat fraud, youth and school exchanges, and transport links.[28]

From memory, happening in parallel to official efforts pre-1998 were countless efforts in civil society north and south to nurture and support the conditions in which people eventually embraced the spirit of the *Agreement* and gave it their assent. I hope young historians will have an appetite for interpreting this period. A particularly fascinating study would be an oral history archive of the Peace Train's journeys between Belfast and Dublin, capturing firsthand accounts from individuals aboard and documenting their discussions, especially while those individuals are still alive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is possible to say that the collection of sources which I reviewed, drawn from Irish state papers for much of the decade leading up to the 1998 *Agreement*,[29] appear to contain DNA variously – and, in some cases, fully developed proposals and schemes – for each and all of the themes which came to be present within one or more strands of the 1998 *Agreement*. The idea that the *Agreement* was a feat of late-1990s heroic brokerage is accurate, but to assume that this was a sudden event achieved by a group of high-profile individuals is far from the complete story of how the *Agreement* was made and the broad professional and human effort which went into making it possible, by people who can be named, and people

who remain unnamed. Perhaps the acceleration towards the *Agreement*, in the months between July 1997 and spring 1998, can be attributed in part to the robustness of this preparation and groundwork.

The *Agreement*, as well as being a model of power-sharing in a divided society (notwithstanding the possibility that this has now enabled a sectarian veto on the democratic health of Northern Ireland and should be updated in the interests of good democratic governance), is a substantial framework for what remains some of the most sophisticated cross-border and inter-jurisdictional cooperation governance in Europe. Based on a plebiscite in two jurisdictions, both Ireland and the UK have protected the terms of the *Agreement* in domestic law. For the *Agreement* to be actually certified dead would require an extensive programme of legislative repeal in Dublin, London and Belfast. All three administrations are busy with more pressing matters.

Reading the sources referenced, as a cross-border cooperation specialist working on the island and in the rest of Europe, it is clear that the model of both parts of the island embracing shared priorities for economic, spatial and regional development – which originated in quiet and thoughtful ideas put forward by ordinary civil servants north and south in the early 1990s – should be renewed as a driver for North-South cooperation. Focusing on placemaking as a unifying concept does not assail national identity or sovereignty and nurtures the dynamics of creativity and solution-finding in all who love a place. A rarely-advertised fact is that while the political institutions of strand one stand still, a momentum of cross-party consensus-based political cooperation has continued undisrupted at the local government/regional cross-border level since the 1990s and allowed the border region and Northern Ireland to withstand the shock and avert the worst of the potential economic and social disruption of both a global pandemic and the Brexit process.

Unionist concerns about the implications of North-South institutional structures have frequently been expressed in the same breath as a preference for flexible and adaptive sectoral and thematic cooperation, which has a sound rationale and respects sovereign governance. There remains a question as to how best the types of harmonisation, alignment and coordination required across borders, for both economies and societies to thrive in the 21st century, are best delivered in the years ahead in a way which, to use the words of Ulster Unionist John Taylor in 1995, passes the ultimate test of improving the standards of people's lives.[30] From the papers

reviewed, the scope of intellectual capital for cross-border cooperation within the two administrative systems on the island went well beyond the sphere of political diplomacy and was a significant capability and asset within a range of major areas of domestic public administration and related policy-making. We should ensure that institutional understanding of the means and philosophy of implementing the *Agreement* across all three strands remains strong in emerging generations of public officials, as does the ability to work across sectors.[31]

As a set of proposed concepts and conditions for the future, the *Agreement* itself was the tip of an iceberg of human effort. It had depth and maturity in how only something developed and refined over time can be. It provides the basis for relative stability on what is now an external EU land and sea border. In years when Europe has been plunged into a crisis unimaginable in the 1990s, following Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, we should not underestimate what the legacy of the *Agreement* can be. We should not be afraid to discuss issues that can strengthen the *Agreement* for a further 25 or 50 years if reviewed and updated. We can start to turn our attention to using these priceless tools we have been given by all those who worked for a better future on these islands and between these islands. In doing so, we can contribute to a sense of possibility that recognising a shared humanity can remain a driver for peace in an international geopolitical context. It's our choice.

In recognising the efforts of many, named and unnamed, I would like to acknowledge the work of Dr Stephen King, former advisor to the Ulster Unionist Party, who worked tirelessly through the period in question to promote the necessary understanding required in securing agreement.

Endnotes

[1] United Nations Peacemaker (1998) *The Northern Ireland Peace Agreement*, 10 April. Available at: https://peacemaker.un.org/

[2] Coalition of Fine Gael, Labour and Democratic Left Parties led respectively by John Bruton, Dick Spring and Proinsías De Rossa.

[3] Women's Resource & Development Agency (2022) *Blog: Women – we want to hear your views on developing a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy in Northern Ireland!*, 21 January. Available at: https://wrda.net/

[4] Hayward, K. (2020) 'The 2019 General Election in Northern Ireland: the Rise of the Centre Ground?' in *The Political Quarterly* Vol. 91, Issue 1 (Jan-Mar 2020); pp. 49-55. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12835

[5] None of the papers suggested that cooperation was a threat to sovereignty and there is an absence of any sense that actively exploring North-South cooperation was somehow outside of a public administration official-level mandate. Nowhere in any Irish state documents reviewed was there any implication that Northern Ireland was viewed as anything other than an integral part of the United Kingdom.

[6] Bell, C. (2008): *On the Law of Peace: Peace Agreements and the Lex Pacificatoria*. Oxford University Press.

[7] Ibid. pp. 56-63.

[8] In that my purpose for reviewing was to write this article, the article content is necessarily and decidedly a 'light touch' treatment of the richness and depth of material that remains. It is therefore firmly intended to be illustrative in nature and is not a comprehensive analysis of all sources.

[9] National Archives of Ireland Doc. Bundle Ref. 2021/46/67.

[10] National Archives of Ireland Doc. Bundle Ref. 2021/47/273.

[11] National Archives of Ireland, Doc. Bundle Ref. 2021/48/56.

[12] National Archives of Ireland, Doc. Bundle Ref. 2021/49/246.

[13] National Archives of Ireland, Doc. Bundle Ref. 2021/49/274.

[14] National Archives of Ireland, Doc. Bundle Ref. 2021/47/200/1 & 2.

[15] National Archives of Ireland, Doc. Bundle Ref. 2021/47/200/1 & 2.

[16] National Archives of Ireland, Doc. Bundle Ref. 2021/47/200/1 & 2.

[17] This was a policy agenda that led to interventions such as the Interreg Programme, and the ongoing focus on the importance for European cohesion of regions and cross-border regions which remains part of the core business of European Commission DG REGIO.

[18] National Archives of Ireland, Doc. Bundle Ref, 2021/47/200/1 & 2.

[19] National Archives of Ireland, Doc. Bundle Ref. 2021/47/12.

[20] National Archives of Ireland, Doc. Bundle Ref. 2021/47/12; (prep notes and miscellaneous materials prepared for Martin Mansergh).

[21] Official Journal of the European Union (2004) Regulation (EC) No 883/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Coordination of Social Security Systems, 29 April. Available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/

[22] Department of Foreign Affairs (1993) *Joint Declaration 1993 (Downing St. Declaration)*, 15 December. Available at: https://www.dfa.ie/

[23] Department of Foreign Affairs (1985) *Anglo-Irish Agreement 1985.* Available at: https://www.dfa.ie/

[24] National Archives of Ireland, Doc. Bundle Ref. 2021/47/12.

[25] National Archives of Ireland, Doc Bundle Refs. TAOIS/2021/97/25; TAOIS/2021/97/6.

[26] National Archives of Ireland, Doc. Bundle Ref. TAOIS/2021/97/25.

[27] Overall, state papers for 1995-1997 reflect the degree of East-West coordination happening on the peace process itself. Other pressing East-West issues reflected in papers for 1995-97 and beyond, which then disappear from view, include those associated with Irish concerns about the impact of THORP - the nuclear fuel reprocessing facility located close to Sellafield - on the Irish Sea and on associated human and marine animal health. DFA papers for 1997 onward, released in 2023, reflect an increasing attention on the issue of identity issues and parades in Northern Ireland alongside records of the all-party talks process.

[28] In addition, the governments agreed to explore cooperation in the additional areas of "new information and communication technologies, 'having regard to progress towards the Information Superhighway', skills potential and added value for workforces, and detailed cooperation on fighting organised crime 'Having regard to the Common Travel Area in these islands'". Additional cooperation would take place in relation to homelessness (in particular Irish people affected by homelessness in Britain), food safety, and strengthened work together on environmental issues.

[29] National Archives of Ireland: List of Doc. Bundles reviewed (complementing specific references): 2021/47/12; 2021/47/10; 2021/46/67; DFA/2021/51/296; DFA/2021/51/379; DFA/2021/51/323; TAOIS/2021/97/25; TAOIS/2021/97/6.

[30] Ulster Unionist politician, John Taylor, in a May 1995 meeting with the Irish Ambassador to the UK: 'The test for all North South Co-operation should be the degree to which it improves the standards of people's lives'. National Archives of Ireland Doc. Bundle Ref. DFA/2021/51/323.

[31] If we view work across international borders as driven by territorial, economic and social development objectives, there is an argument to say that cross-border cooperation should be part of normal business and within the leadership competencies of both extended public service workforces on an ongoing basis, that to mobilise existing systems to work together requires only effective governance and accountability, and that an overly-formalised approach to North-South work which is confined in scope to designated institutions and bodies, may not on its own nurture the necessary agility to deliver effectively for citizens.

"In many ways, the ordinary people doing their ordinary work made a greater contribution to reconciliation":

Interview with Rory O'Hanlon

Researched by **Sophia Copeland** and **Hari Choudhari**[1]

Rory O'Hanlon *was born in Dublin in 1934. His father had fought in the IRA during the Irish War of Independence, and was a medical officer in the Irish Army. Rory grew up in Mullaghbawn, Co. Armagh, before graduating in medicine from University College Dublin in 1959. In 1965, the Local Appointments Commission sent him to work as a General Practitioner (GP) in Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan, where he worked for the County Council. He served on the North Eastern Health Board from 1971 to 1987, Monaghan County Council from 1979 to 1987, and was also Chair of the Fianna Fáil's Monaghan County Executive (Comhairle Dáil Cheantair).*

He had joined the Fiann Fáil Cumann during his time at UCD, becoming member and later chair of the Cumann in Carrickmacross. In 1977, Rory was elected to the Dáil as a Fianna Fáil TD for Cavan-Monaghan. In 1983, he was promoted to Charles Haughey's front benches as spokesperson for Health and Social Welfare. He continued as a GP during this time, until he became Minister for Health from 1987 to 1991. He held a number of roles, including as Minister for the Environment (1991-1992), Leas-Ceann Comhairle (1997-2002), and Ceann Comhairle (2002-2007). Rory retired from politics in 2011 at the age of 77, and continues to live in Carrickmacross.

Anthony Soares [AS]: Alright, so we'll get started. So the first question is, you partly grew up in Monaghan?

Rory O'Hanlon [RO'H]: Well, I was born in Dublin in 1934. My father was in general practice in England, but his house was in Dublin. But when the emergency started – the Second World War – Frank Aiken, who had been a colleague of his in the War of Independence, invited him back from England to join the Army as a medical officer. So he became a medical officer in the Irish Army. In 1939, we moved to live in Mullaghbawn, where we had a home. It was his home place. So I went to school in Mullaghbawn, to the National School. My memories of school are pleasant.

AS: You have family in South Armagh, as well?

RO'H: I do. My grandmother and four brothers of my father, and two sisters all lived in Mullaghbawn. So we lived in the middle of family there. That was very pleasant. In those days in rural Ireland, it was all about community. Everybody looked after everybody else. So it was a very pleasant place to live, despite the fact that you had the Second World War.

Now, we were fortunate in Mullaghbawn, because the War didn't really touch us in the sense of having any serious fatalities. But you had a lot of Army manoeuvres that were very intimidating for young people. You had gas masks at school. You had the sirens. You had the searchlights in the sky at night, which was all a bit intimidating as to what might happen next. But we survived that until 1945. I went to boarding school in 1945, to St Mary's in Dundalk for two years, and then to Blackrock in Dublin for five years. At the end of those five years, I went to UCD where I studied medicine and I qualified in 1959. I did three years of six-month jobs. Three years in hospitals – medicine, surgery, maternity, children's. Tuberculosis, which was very prominent in those days. There were special tuberculosis hospitals. Then, fevers, which was very interesting. There was a special fever hospital. You don't have them now. […] But in those days, it was important because of things like diphtheria, [and] you had polio. All these were common, and you would always admit them to a fever hospital.

I got a couple of years in general practice down in Limerick, a temporary job. Then, I was offered a permanent job in 1965 in Carrickmacross. So, I've been there since in one guise or another, primarily as a citizen of the town.

In 1965, it would have been a relatively peaceful year. 1966 was the 50th anniversary of the 1916 rising, so there would have been a lot of parades and celebrations. I expect that they would have increased the tension between the two communities in Northern Ireland. Then, I suppose, the Troubles as such from 1969. It just so happened that there was a man shot in [Armagh] on 14th August. On 15th August in Mullaghbawn, there was a commemoration of 1916 with the unveiling of a statue to commemorate it. Frank Aiken, who was the Minister for Foreign Affairs, was the guest of honour. Frank Aiken wasn't sure whether commemorations would go ahead or not on account of the trouble. The message I sent to him was that nobody knew South Armagh better than himself and that everything would go ahead as planned, and so it did. It went off peacefully enough.

Following on, the Troubles became quite serious, north of the border particularly. I was only eight miles from the border in Carrickmacross. My medical practice would have gone across the border because I was a doctor to my own relatives, as well as having patients that were on the other side of the border. So, yeah, you would have been used to checkpoints. […] [They] were intimidating […]. […] When I went to Carrickmacross, I would have been quite close to the border there. You would have seen a lot of trouble.

AS: You grew up near the border. You were working, in terms of your medical practice, near the border and across the border. You're talking about crossing the border and what it was like. But for people in the south who lived, let's say, in Dublin, further away from the border, do you think they'd be as relaxed as you were in terms of crossing the border?

RO'H: No, and I think it's quite interesting the number of people, particularly people who would have had border connections [in terms of family], who didn't go near the border the length of the Troubles. Now, again, we've six children. My wife, she's a Galway girl. It was all very foreign to her when she came up. We never wanted the children to develop a border mentality. Armagh was part of their roots and we wanted them to grow up so it would feel like normal to go back and forward. We always felt if we don't keep crossing the border, they may well grow away from it. So we used to go across regularly to see my aunts and uncles, and go to places like Newcastle for a day, Warrenpoint for a day. Going to our summer house in Donegal, Gweedore. We used to go to the Glens of Antrim sometimes and stay a night. Just so that it would have this comfortable feel about it. Thankfully, they have. It's interesting if you talk to them, they will mention that they found the

border crossings and the big lookout towers and the checkpoints intimidating, but it never deterred them from wanting to go back and forward across.

Hari Choudhari [HC]: Jumping a little bit back to the earlier years because you had family across the border in South Armagh and you're based in Monaghan. How did you all discuss the border? Was it really something permanent or present in everyday conversation? Was it something that was avoided because it was a difficult topic? Was it just something that was a matter of life, a matter of fact?

RO'H: I suppose an interesting point to make, I don't know if it applies to everybody or only myself. I was born in 1934. That was just eleven years after the War of Independence ended. Even though my father and his family were heavily involved, to a lot of the people in Mullaghbawn it might as well have been 1798. Now, the interesting thing is that World War II, that's over 70 years ago now, that's like yesterday to me because I lived in it. I didn't live in the War of Independence. Even though it was only 11 years [before me], there was a terrible lot of feeling about the War of Independence but it didn't have the same impact certainly on me, and still doesn't, as the last World War in terms of memory.

I suppose if you look at Mullaghbawn, Mullaghbawn was 99% nationalist. There was one enclave at the far end of the parish where there was a Protestant family, the Murdochs. Very decent, honourable people and the community were terribly well integrated. The son, Jim Murdoch, he came to our school in Mullaghbawn. We got on extremely well together, but we weren't in a mixed community so we weren't exposed in that way.

Now, the politics were interesting because in my youth, and, again, I put this down to proximity to the War of Independence, the general view of everybody in the area I lived in was that there should be a referendum and the whole of Ireland, majority rule, end of Stormont. That's it. They'll tell me that's the way it was, right or wrong. As you grew older, you begin to realise it's not a simple solution. The only interesting thing that you could say in its favour was that if you had the referendum in the 1920s or the 1930s, you were having it with the generation who put partition there. Afterwards, I suppose when I went to college, I became a great advocate that the Unionists in the north, born after partition was established – that you couldn't

disenfranchise them. So the solution had to be found that would accommodate everybody.

I would give John Hume the credit for influencing a whole generation of politicians and others with that concept that you had to accommodate everyone, that everybody had rights. I think that as a conceptual thinker, he's one of the great Irishmen of the century and maybe one of the great Irishmen of all time. The way he could hammer home his message and the clear message that he had to hammer home. I do think that his influence was massive on a breed of politicians. He preached that message. He was so articulate. He had such good integrity in his message that I think was easy to listen to. I think he did his share. The other, his colleague, Seamus Mallon, in a different way. I would quote Seamus Mallon regularly when I would go across to canvass in the elections for the SDLP in South Armagh. I believe that he, as one man, changed the mindset in Westminster about Ireland generally and particularly about policing and the judicial system in the north of Ireland. He never compromised his principles. He never fell out with anybody. He made tremendous friends right across the board. I think that he's another man we owe a great debt of gratitude to.

Co. Monaghan was severely impacted by the troubles. We were fortunate in our town. We were the only town apparently that didn't have a bomb in it. Now, unfortunately we lost a couple of Guards in it. Lost a very nice young fella, a trainee Guard, over in Ballinamore at Leitrim when Don Tidey was kidnapped and he was shot. Gary Sheehan, a very nice young lad. Now, Monaghan town got a bad bombing. Seven people killed in the same day as the Dublin bombings. In fact, the two bombings that day still account for the largest loss of life in one day during the whole Troubles. You know, innocent people killed, just bombs planted indiscriminately. Each of the other towns in their turn had bombs planted without any warning. There were people killed from Castleblayney, Ballybay, Clones in the Monaghan town bombing. So there would have been a lot of trouble in that regard.

Now, something that I think should never be forgotten is the tremendous work of our Army and our Gardaí, our police force, in protecting the border despite those atrocities I talk about. The Guards did phenomenal work. Our Army is different from the British Army. Our Army is support for the civilian police force. A soldier can't stop you and ask you for your driver's licence or anything like that. They have no police powers. They're purely a back-up to the civilian police force. Security south of the border was quite intense with many checkpoints.

I'd one interesting experience. It didn't strike me until I got home. About two o'clock in the morning I was driving from Monaghan town to Carrickmacross. I was in the south all the time, but I was stopped by a soldier at Clontibret, which would still be in the south. He stepped out of the kitchen. He asked me my name and for my licence. I showed it to him. He had a helmet on and the whole lot. It was only when I was going to have to go did I realise he was a British soldier, because I didn't realise at that stage that an Irish soldier didn't have the right. What struck me as peculiar about him was he was a very young man and he was wearing glasses. […]

He had a very, very English accent. So I was well away from him when it struck me that he was a British soldier who had just rambled across the border, no mark to tell him where. Thankfully, nobody shot him that night! I'd be blaming myself for not reporting him. The Army and the Guards did a very good job. The television camera, when introduced, brought a more objective view of the conflict.

HC: During the IRA border campaign, as well? '56 to '62, did they have an influence on that?

RO'H: In '56 to '62, now that's a very interesting campaign. I was living just three miles from the border on the northern side during that campaign. Now, interestingly in my view, that campaign originated in the south of Ireland. It was carried on in the north. It was carried on within ten miles of the border. They rarely went beyond that. If you take the Armagh barracks away, the Omagh barracks, they were the two big weights I suppose. But everything was along the border. They blew up the port at Newry, blew the canal up. Newry was a very nationalist town, very much dependent on its port. The port never opened again. They blew it up.

They used to pull up at the border, run across the border, plant bombs and run away again. They would come to the border. They would shoot policemen from the border. There were four policemen shot in my home area in Mullaghbawn, where you didn't have many police anyway. You know, they were all shot from the border. One, he was blown up on his bicycle and, again, blown up from the border. If you look at the names of the people involved, they were nearly all from the south of Ireland. […] Now, it would be my view, that it was a rebellion that was started from the south and was carried on from the south. They never went too far into the north. It fizzled out. I think internment on both sides of the border sort of finished it.

It's interesting because that was '61, '62. It was a fairly peaceful ten years. But in 1969 and the Troubles started in Belfast, apparently there were no guns in Belfast. It's a very interesting thing.

A first cousin of mine, Paddy O'Hanlon, who was a member of the SDLP and a real pacifist at heart, terribly anti-violence, had a very interesting career. His father had lost a leg in the War of Independence but neither his father or any of his family had any bitterness whatsoever. When Paddy went to Stormont as an MP, he was extremely friendly with a lot of unionists. He built a terrible lot of friendships, which he had for his lifetime until he died. He died quite young. He went to Dublin in 1969 to see Jack Lynch as Taoiseach, along with Paddy Kennedy, to know would they send arms to the north. The situation was so serious. Now, this for a pacifist. Paddy and myself, he was ten years younger than me, but we were great friends all our lives. Paddy had a very, very broad mind in terms of the whole concept of community. He went on to do law, to study law, when he lost his seat in Stormont. He was very friendly with some of the prominent judiciary. John Creaney was the Director of Prosecutions. A great unionist was John Creaney. He entertained Teresa and myself in his house. He had his wee lambeg drum under the table in the drawing-room. But a lovely gentleman, himself and his wife. A group of barristers in the north used to go to the States every two years to visit the battlefields of the civil war. It was a most entertaining fortnight. Teresa and myself used to go with them. But it was that friendship that they were able to develop. They still respected each other.

AS: You're talking about how he had friendships with unionists, going into Stormont, being able to have friendships with unionist politicians and unionist barristers. Being a pacifist at heart, but for him then to go down to Dublin to the Taoiseach to ask "is there any chance of sending arms to the north." I mean, it must have taken a lot for that to happen. If you have unionist friends and you're a pacifist and then to turn around and say, right, I'm going to go down to Dublin and ask for-, the situation must have been that bad.

RO'H: Yes. Well, the situation was that bad. Now, people will tell you that there were only four guns in Belfast in 1969 in the hands of paramilitaries on the nationalist side and that they were in the hands of the official IRA at the end of the Falls Road. Now, I've seen that written in books but people have told me that. I think the danger was that in that August '69 and, again, you have to ask yourself what influence, if any, the commemorations of 1966

had in raising the temperature. Like, there were a few things that happened at the same time that weren't healthy. […]

In '69, the '70s, early '70s was a very difficult time. Apart from the Guard from Carrickmacross that was killed over in Leitrim, there were other Guards from Monaghan killed in the country in bomb explosions, including Garda Clerkin. Mainly on this side of the border […].

One of those very interesting things about the whole area of the Troubles is the amount of good people that were out in the community. While there was a terrible lot of bitterness, which is always unfortunate, and a lot of it, I suppose, stoked on by the different paramilitary groups, there were a terrible lot of good people who, no matter what happened to themselves or anyone else, they didn't want trouble. I often think that in many ways, the ordinary people doing their ordinary work made a greater contribution to reconciliation than a terrible lot of the politicians. There are very, very many good examples of quiet work going on behind the scenes. If you take north Monaghan there, there was a Father Sean Nolan, who was a parish priest for years and years in the parish. He developed a friendship with Billy Tate. Billy Tate would have been on the Ulster Unionist Council when he was a schoolteacher in Aughnacloy. They became like blood brothers. The amount of good they did. Their sole interest was reconciliation and cross-border, cross-community. […]

AS: What you're talking about there is communities and people not wanting trouble and wanting to keep peaceful relations within their own communities. Well, I think, that those communities that live close, especially those that live close to the border, you're talking about Monaghan, Aughnacloy, that's like a stone's throw. Right next door to each other. Those communities would have always lived together. They tried to keep that going.

RO'H: Tried to keep that level, yeah. Interestingly, at Billy Tate's funeral in Lurgan, I'm not sure whether it was the Presbyterian or the Church of Ireland church, Father Nolan was the first man up in the pulpit to read one of the lessons. That sort of relationship was there.

Pre the Good Friday Agreement, there were all these sorts of efforts to build communities and to rectify the ordinary day-to-day things that were wrong. It's interesting now. When I was Minister for Health, '87 to '91, I used to meet my counterpart in the north. What was the name? Oh, Richard Needham.

He was the Health Minister in the north.[2] We used to meet twice a year. Generally we'd launch something, maybe a conference. What we decided was that money was scarce on both sides of the border. This was pre-Good Friday Agreement. Money was scarce on both sides of the border. What we should be looking at is: how can we save money by cooperating, without upsetting anybody's politics? As minister, my officials came in to me one day and said we're due a meeting with our northern counterparts. I said fair enough. They said, well, you're launching something in Limerick in a month's time, an immunisation programme. It's one that they're using in the north and we're going to be using the same one. I said fair enough. What was interesting about that was that the Minister and the officials would go to the meeting and the officials stayed up talking to each other. After that night, they had become such good friends because of socialising together. The ministers hoofed it off to bed and left them to it. But the next time we met, they were great friends. I always thought it was well worth going there just to build that, breakdown any worries that anyone might have.

AS: You even mentioned there on that occasion they said, right, you're launching an immunisation programme in Limerick. We see something good happening in the north, so we're going to use our version of that programme here. You're talking about it's not just the ministers meeting, it's the officials coming together and they socialise, they're getting to know each other. I mean, this is years before we have a North South Ministerial Council and it is also important that it's the officials speaking to each other.

RO'H: They were all singing off the same hymn sheet when it comes to health. We might have different political views, but that's irrelevant. But other good initiatives where we started crushing kidney stones. You know, Ireland has, what, 6 million people all together, north and south? You really can't afford a very high tech service, three or four of them, for 6 million people where one might do. Crushing the kidney stones, we started doing that in Dublin. In return for providing the service to the north, for the total body of radiation on children waiting for a transplant, we used to send the children to Scotland. Now, we send them to Belvoir Park in Belfast. Very practical sort of stuff.

Another one was when we were buying a magnetic resonance machine – the first one in the south, I think, for Beaumont Hospital – and they were buying one for the Royal Vic[toria] in Belfast. So on the tender document, we put in what's the saving if you pool two? 100,000. You know, that sort of

cooperation, it offended nobody's politics. But still, some politicians, they wouldn't want too much cooperation, irrespective of the good that might come of it.

AS: So there you're talking about really practical forms of cooperation. It makes sense. Let's buy two of these machines together, instead of you buying one, I buy one and it costs us an arm and a leg. We both buy two together. Very practical examples of cooperation within health.

R'OH: I suppose you had different cross-border bodies who helped make tremendous strides, where the local authorities on both sides of the border came together. Now, Monaghan County Council and Louth County Council, two counties on the border in the south, and Down District Council and Newry and Mourne District Council, two more councils on the northern side of the border, came together to form the East Border Region. Now, elected representatives from each side of the border met I think every month or every two months, to discuss issues of common interest. The European Union was a great support. The International Fund for Ireland, great support. To discuss common interests. I remember I wasn't on it that long because when I became a minister, I had to give up my place on the local authority. You couldn't be a minister and be a member of a local authority.

Roads were always an issue. If you're in the south of Ireland, it's still an issue. Probably if you live along the A6, it's an issue as well. The condition of roads, particularly the rural roads away from the main highways. I remember at that stage, we were discussing the Dublin-Belfast road. Now, surprise, surprise, the Dublin-Belfast road didn't loom very high on the list of priorities, even though they were the two principal cities on the island. It took a long time to get around to them. On the northern side, the prime motorway went from Belfast to Dungannon. It went way inland. It didn't go towards Dublin. I remember being at a meeting. The mind boggles when you think about it. There was a proposal that you'd put an ordinary dual carriageway between Dundalk and Newry. Some representatives on the EBRC saw no need for it. They thought a single carriageway was fine. There were, unfortunately, politics creeping into things it shouldn't creep into. For example, the health service. If you were serious about people's health, you wouldn't be too worried about the politics. You would do the right thing.

AS: You were on Monaghan County Council for a few years. You talked about then meeting on a regular basis with elected councillors from the

other councils on the other side of the border. That's important, it's elected councillors that run the Eastern Border Region (EBR). They decide what they want to do, what their priorities are. Obviously when you're talking about, on both sides, councils are made up of political representatives from various parties. But on the northern side, you'll have unionists and you'll have nationalists.

RO'H: Unfortunately whatever way you look at it, on the northern side because Newry and Mourne and Down council areas would be mainly nationalist, the councillors would be majority nationalist. Now, Louth and Monaghan would be similar, although Monaghan did elect two councillors who were elected under the banner of the Protestant Association, which was interesting for them to run under. There were two councillors when I was on it.

In fairness to the East Border Region, they never got involved in the politics. They stayed in their own jurisdiction, which was local government. Naturally, there'd be interesting things like health services, cooperation between Dundalk and Newry. The roads were always a big thing. Education. I mentioned the European Union and the International Fund for Ireland. What I used to do years ago when I was an active politician, when I would meet American friends the first thing I'd do is thank them for their contribution to the International Fund for Ireland. The International Fund for Ireland, in my view, was one of the great organisations that was established and it did a phenomenal amount of good work. It was a fund that the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the European Union subscribed to, quite a substantial fund. You could apply and they gave money for worthwhile community projects. It could fund projects that the state would be afraid to fund because it didn't go through legislation, it didn't do this, that or the other thing. So it was a very flexible fund, but the amount of good work that they did is astronomical.

One of the projects they had, which I found very interesting, I sat on the board of a cross-border voluntary group, Clanrye. Clanrye was started, actually, by Paddy O'Hanlon, my first cousin, but it was divided into two because it developed a building section and they repaired old buildings. Probably the most famous one is the InterTradeIreland building, the old gas works in Newry. But when they established the building group, Paddy O'Hanlon went with that group. They had another group who took disadvantaged children – not children who were in trouble with the law

necessarily, but just children who didn't get into second level education. They started a training workshop. That was a spectacular success. […]

AS: You were referring to earlier in terms of communities wanting to have good relations, despite everything that was going on during the Troubles. Then, you have these funding programmes coming in to support that type of activity that is happening on the ground between people, between community groups, between churches. So it was there, the will was there, but the funds then come in.

RO'H: Definitely helped it. I think you see that while, I suppose, part of the problem of trying to define the problem in the north is that religion creeps into it. It's a convenient label to say on that side the Catholics, on that side the Protestants. My view is that religion has nothing to do with it. If people can involve themselves in not respecting the dignity of their neighbour, they've no religion. They might have thought they had, but they haven't. I think it had provided a convenient label because the churches, in general, did a very good job here. The church leaders kept very close to each other. Like, the late Cardinal Ó Fiaich, who was the head of the Catholic Church at the height of the Troubles, and this would be well before the Good Friday Agreement. He didn't live to see it. He was the Archbishop of Armagh. He'd be the head of the church in Ireland. He was from Crossmaglen, which would have the name of being an ultra-nationalist area. But he was a man who was obviously a pacifist, obviously anti-violence, but had a phenomenal understanding – he was a professor of history – of the origins of the conflict and what needed to be done and how to settle it. He got on very well with his colleagues in their church. I was at parties in his house in Armagh over at the cathedral. There would be leading members of the other churches there. He used to sing The Old Orange Flute at the parties. There was this great mix between them that went on. I would say they represented the overwhelming majority of the people living throughout the whole island. Unfortunately, the bad name comes from the minority who cause a lot of the trouble.

Sophia Copeland [SC]: You talked a bit about how the border region, at the local level specifically, tried to talk about the roads, they talked about education, they talked about health. Community-based issues that transcended the border. But then in your time in the Dáil, to what effect did you try and champion those kinds of issues for your constituency or in general try and promote cross-border issues from your constituency? Or, did this even play a role at all?

RO'H: Well, obviously there'd be debates in the Dáil on the different issues but I suppose most of the work we would have been in government most of the time was to go direct to ministers. Because part of the problem in our parliament is, in every parliament, the adversarial politics. You get a much better hearing coming in to a minister behind a closed door and telling them.

Now, a lot of those issues were being raised time and time again. In fact, when I was on the county council, I had a resolution in 1982 to build a main road, national highway from Greenore on the other side of Dundalk all the way to Sligo on the west coast. Surprise, surprise, surprise, I couldn't get full support for that at Monaghan County Council because a direct road would be through the south of the county into Cavan and down into Enniskillen and across to Sligo. But the majority of the elected representatives in Monaghan thought it should go zig-zag right across county Monaghan, that it would include their area. That's part of the problem with local politics […]. It's still on the agenda. It's making slow progress. That's, what, 40 years ago? It'll come eventually.

AS: So let's take it away from here. I'll give you an example. Let's say Spain and Portugal. Obviously, parliament in Madrid, parliament in Lisbon but you have local politicians who live on the border, and some of the things that they need for their constituencies need cross-border cooperation. It makes sense to them and adds up. But when you get to Lisbon and Madrid and you start raising these types of issues, it's of no interest to the majority of the parliamentarians sitting in those assemblies because they don't have border constituencies. They don't necessarily understand what those needs are. When you get up to ministerial level, unless the minister happens to be a representative of a border region, they are not necessarily interested.

RO'H: I agree with you.

AS: Did you think you managed to get that message across when you were in the Dáil and you were a minister? That you could get that message across, north-south cooperation in these specific circumstances in terms of health, this makes sense?

RO'H: Yes. I think you would get the message across. But another interesting point that's worth making is this. Two points. Even when I went into the Dáil, the relationship between politicians in Dublin and the unionist politicians in the north and in Britain was nil. Now, that's important to me in this context. It's interesting that the one politician that I had a good relationship with in

the north was Harold McCusker. Now, Harold McCusker would be seen as a very die-hard unionist politician on television. But we had a common interest, which was to drain the Fane river that ran through both our constituencies and flooded the land on the farmers. We shared that common interest. We used to meet. He was a wonderful person to meet. Great conversationalist and had great stories. Wouldn't compromise his principles, nor would I want him to. We got on extremely well together. Then, the next thing that happened, which I think came out of the 1985 agreement, the Garrett FitzGerald agreement, and that was the British-Irish interparliamentary body. Now, I think it's true to say that there was very little contact, except at ministerial level, between the Dáil and Westminster. If you were a backbencher, you knew nobody and nobody knew you. There was a suspicion and the suspicion was often fed by politicians that the border wasn't being properly secured on the southern side. That they were going easy on the paramilitaries. That was before the 1985 agreement.

Now, in 1990 they established 25 members of Westminster, 25 members from Dáil Eireann into the British Irish interparliamentary body. It met every three months in plenary session. Met every two months in committee. There were four committees. I, for a long time, chaired the political and security committee, which was a very interesting exercise. But we got to know our colleagues in Westminster. We became great friends. To me, that doesn't get the credit it deserves for helping to create the environment in which you could garner support for the Good Friday Agreement, because a lot of them had a view that the south wasn't pulling its weight in border security. Now, I remember when we had a meeting here, I would bring a committee to Carrickmacross. I remember on a Monday afternoon, we went to Crossmaglen for a visit to the police barracks. It was like Fort Knox, you know? I'm not blaming them. They couldn't live out in the town and participate in the activities of the town. They'd have to go out with the Army, six or seven Army guarding them to go out to do any sort of duty. Like, it must have been terrible for them. The nearest one to home was 33 miles away from his home.

Now, on the next morning, Tuesday morning, I brought them in to the barracks at Carrickmacross to be told about community policing. In Carrickmacross, all of the Guards lived in the town. They were natives all over the country, but they actually lived in the town. They trained the football teams. They were involved in everything. The children going up the street would call the Gardaí by their first name. To me, there's two places ten miles

apart and that's community policing in the two areas. So that itself tells you there's a problem to be solved. Again, we went to Monaghan another time and met the border superintendent, who became commissioner afterwards, Pat Byrne. He gave a talk on border security. You know, you could actually be there listening to him because he was out front, he was straight, he answered questions. People who were sceptical of security on this side of the border, one man in particular, he was a junior minister afterwards, he wouldn't allow anybody on British television to say a word against security on the Irish side of the border. So there was a lot of good work done there. But I think building that friendship and relationship was a very good exercise that came pre-Good Friday Agreement. I think all those things put together helped to create the environment for the Good Friday Agreement to succeed.

AS: Well, obviously the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly is still going. You have parliamentarians still meeting.

RO'H: It's still functioning, and still has a function to fulfil because it would amaze you with the sorts of issues that shouldn't be there that are there.

HC: Now moving forward a little bit into the early phases of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Of course, it's changed the face of the border. That's self-explanatory. But how were places like Monaghan and the cross-border communities involved in creating that Agreement? I mean, your personal experience and your capacity as Leas-Cheann Comhairle in the Dáil, were you involved in any degree in the negotiations?

RO'H: Not in the negotiations as such, you know? I would have had close contact with my counterparts when I was minister and all, but not directly in the Good Friday Agreement. It was the Taoiseach, the prime ministers, the ministers for justice, the ministers for foreign affairs mainly that dealt with the issues. An interesting document that went before the Good Friday Agreement was a document that was prepared by Paddy O'Hanlon and his colleagues. He writes about it in his book, which was *The End of Term Report*. Before he died he wrote an autobiography. I don't know whether you've ever read it or not, but it's a very, very interesting book. He's a very interesting character. Yeah, himself and Eugene Grant would be barristers. They wrote a document on policing, on the courts. They were the two principal ones, anyway – the need for reform and how to be reformed. It's quite interesting because they wrote the document but then they had to be very careful who they gave it to. If it was seen to come from SDLP or seen to come from even

the Dublin government – he has in the book that eventually it went to the British government. But he did the document because he gave me a copy of it after he did it. About 18 months before the Agreement. He had us sworn to secrecy to put it away. It's interesting, in that a lot of what appears in the document appeared in the settlement. Again, you'd a lot of people, a lot of politicians. Seamus Mallon would have been at that, Frank Feely, another MP in Newry would have been involved in it. Like, there was a lot of good work going on all the time. […]

AS: Maybe just one final question in terms of the future, because a lot of the conversation has been what happened before '98. Now, a lot's happened since '98. Let's look at Belfast since 1998. It's completely transformed. You cannot recognise Belfast in terms of what it used to be in '98 and what it is now. So, lots of positive things.

RO'H: Oh, yes.

AS: But if you just focus on the north-south cooperation part of things, north-south collaboration, discussions, conversations. Obviously, things got a bit, let's say, complicated because of Brexit. Perhaps we're now moving into a more positive space again because of the Windsor Framework. Do you think the north-south cooperation space is in a healthy position now, compared to what it was?

RO'H: I think it's in a much more healthy position, but what has been lacking, in my view, and not since the Good Friday Agreement but before it as well, is the sort of leadership you need. I'm a great believer that if you want to solve a problem, you need good leaders on both sides. I think we were very fortunate, both in the run up to the Good Friday Agreement, particularly at the time of the Good Friday Agreement, that it was the two governments and you had Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair, in the same way as I would give FW de Klerk exactly the same kudos as I'd give Nelson Mandela for the settlement in South Africa. I spent a month in South Africa monitoring the 1994 election for the European Union. Now, that's another day's work but to me, I would have nothing but the height of respect for FW de Klerk. Now, you can look at the party before he took this turn but to me they couldn't have got a settlement without somebody on the nationalist party side who would show courage and leadership. He showed that. We had the same sort of courage and leadership in the Good Friday Agreement: David Trimble, Bill Clinton, George Mitchell and many others contributed.

Now, I would love to see leaders come along. I have no doubt it'll happen. I think the younger people coming up have a better sense of where they are and where they're coming from. A lot of the old struggles that people got excited about are gone. The influence of the Catholic Church, that has always loomed very large as something to be afraid of. But there's no need for people to be afraid of it any more. It no longer has the dominant position it once had, like the other churches. But I think that young people coming up, being educated together, getting involved together, that it's going to throw up leadership that will say, look, we have to move on from this stuff. […]

AS: Thank you so much, Rory. Fantastic.

Endnotes

[1] This interview was conducted on 28 June 2023 by Anthony Soares (Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies), Sophia Copeland and Hari Choudari (both interns at the Centre for Cross Border Studies, from Georgetown University).

[2] Richard Needham MP served as Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland between 1985 and 1992, having previously served (among other roles) as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland between 1983 and 1984.

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