

# “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](#)<sup>1</sup>

**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 50<sup>th</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> August. On 15<sup>th</sup> 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 lambeag 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.<sup>2</sup> 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[torian] 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 InterTradelreland 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 Éireann 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

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- <sup>1</sup> 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).
- <sup>2</sup> 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.