

Conflict resolution and reconciliation: An Irish perspective

On 31 January 2011, the British Academy hosted a panel discussion on 'Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation'. Dáithí O'Ceallaigh, former Ambassador of Ireland to London, was one of the civil servants, from both Britain and Ireland, who worked over a period of more than 30 years to resolve the conflict in Northern Ireland. He drew on his personal experience to offer some general conclusions.

THE CONFLICT THAT broke out in Northern Ireland in 1969 was but the latest episode in a sectarian, inter-communal strife that, in reality, had lasted from the beginning of the 17th century. It had to do with religion but, most importantly, it had to do with how people saw themselves. The Unionists saw themselves as British and wished to remain part of the United Kingdom. The Nationalists, who made up about a third of the population, saw themselves as Irish who wished to be with the southern part of the island.

When the island was divided in 1921, it was done so on a sectarian headcount to ensure that, in Northern Ireland, there would always be a majority of Unionists. One Northern Ireland prime minister referred to it as 'a protestant state for a protestant people', and the result was serious discrimination against the one-third minority, which eventually exploded in 1969.

North/south, London/Dublin

Northern Ireland should not be seen in isolation. There are two other aspects: one is the relationship between Northern Ireland and the south; the other, the relationship between London and Dublin.

From 1921, certainly until the mid 1960s, in the south we fed on a diet of anti-partitionist rhetoric. We continually emphasised that the only way to resolve the problem was unity, but no attempt was made by any government in the south to learn or understand what either community in Northern Ireland felt.

The relationship between London and Dublin, quite frankly, was poisonous. I served in the Irish embassy in London from 1977 to 1982 dealing with the British press and political parties. I was here at the time of the murders of Lord Mountbatten and Airey Neave, both of them by Irish Republicans; the hunger strikes; and perhaps the issue that caused the most difficulty between the two governments – the Falklands, when my

government, which at that time was on the Security Council, worked for a UN solution to resolve the differences between Mrs Thatcher and the Argentine government.

Garret FitzGerald

When I returned to Ireland in late 1982, there was no trust between London and Dublin, between the police forces, or between the governments. As Garret FitzGerald described in his autobiography, when he came into power at the end of 1982, 'the relationship between London and Dublin was little short of disastrous'. He was very determined to try to do something to help Northern Ireland, and he developed a three-pronged approach.

First, a number of us from the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin spent most of our time in Northern Ireland talking to people right across the spectrum – to everybody except the paramilitaries and the terrorists. I was the first Irish civil servant ever to talk to a member of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), during one of those visits in the early 1980s.

Second, FitzGerald tried to re-examine the essence of Irish nationalism, beyond the simple rhetoric that the island should be united; and, over a period of about two years, the notion of Irish nationalism was reformulated, drawing particularly on the principle of consent.

Third, he strove to build up a relationship with the government in London. The negotiations between London and Dublin effectively took two years. The negotiating teams were led by the two cabinet secretaries – negotiations between London and Dublin, which continue, are still led by the two cabinet secretaries.

Anglo-Irish Agreement

An agreement was eventually reached in November 1985 – the Anglo-Irish Agreement – and it is from this that everything has come. A small Anglo-Irish secretariat – something quite unique – was established in Belfast, and

I was very privileged to be on the Irish side of that secretariat. One purpose of the Irish side was to try to assist the British to rule part of the United Kingdom through sensitising them to Nationalist concerns. We had a number of tasks. One was to try to explain to the British what Nationalists needed; but we were also trying to prove that it was possible for Nationalists to resolve their grievances and differences through dealing directly with us, and we would take up their concerns with the British government.

From a British point of view – and security improvements was Mrs Thatcher's real reason, I think, for agreeing to the Anglo-Irish Agreement – there was, in time, a big change in co-operation on security. We provided, in the Anglo-Irish secretariat in Belfast, a space where the police from both sides could come together and reach out to each other. We also reached out to the British Army. Slowly, then, things progressed.

In the south, we had made a huge step in the Anglo-Irish Agreement, because we said that the only way that Ireland could be united was with the consent of a majority in Northern Ireland. We had hoped at the time that this would be helpful to the Unionists but, as some of you will know, that was not the case, for quite a long while afterwards. They were shocked by the Anglo-Irish Agreement. They were shocked that the British government would allow the Irish government to become involved in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland, and were shocked that Thatcher had reached an agreement with us.

They came out on the streets in very large numbers. There was a peaceful protest on one Saturday in early December 1985, and we reckoned that at least one third of the male Unionist population in Northern Ireland participated in that massive protest. Early in January 1986, there was a march of 18,000 from Derry to Belfast, led mostly by the DUP and the Loyalists, who attempted to expel the Irish civil servants from Belfast. It was

probably the most frightening day of my life. I was inside a heavily fortified building with one other person from Dublin and, between us and roughly 18,000 Loyalists, who very definitely had murder in their minds, there were 600 RUC men. The latter were very welcome to us.

Downing Street Declaration

As security improved between London and Dublin, it became obvious to the Provisional IRA that they were not going to win what they called a war. John Hume, who had always called for acceptance of difference, giving as an example the manner in which the French and the Germans worked together in the European Community, kept on pressing within the Nationalist community, as did Seamus Mallon, that their grievances, differences and difficulties could be resolved politically by using the contacts between the two governments. By the early 1990s, the governments had become so close that it was possible for them together to produce what is called the Downing Street Declaration, which was a statement of principles, agreed by both governments, that must underpin any settlement in Northern Ireland. The actual negotiation involving the two governments and all the parties in Northern Ireland –

which was not easy – effectively took place from 1994 until 2007.

Political leadership

I am not going to go into the detail, because it would take too long, but let me just draw a few conclusions. We would not be where we are today but for determined political leadership: on the Irish side, people like Garret FitzGerald, Albert Reynolds, John Bruton, Bertie Ahern and Brian Cowan; on the British side, people like Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and now David Cameron.

There is now a closeness in the relationship between London and Dublin which is quite extraordinary. The reason is that both sides stepped outside the box. We and the British government were willing to move in order to resolve a problem that had been around for a very long time. People like John Hume were prepared to reach out to the Unionists. People like Geoffrey Howe, who is very proud of the fact that he is a Celt – he is a Welshman – and who explained to Mrs Thatcher, who is not a Celt, what he thought we had in mind. People like Garret FitzGerald, who was prepared to move out of the box and try to learn what other people thought and how we could find ways to resolve the differences between us.

Inclusiveness

A second, very difficult point is inclusiveness. This is particularly difficult when people are using guns and bombs, and it took a very long time indeed for the Unionists in particular to accept the bona fides of the Republican movement. I am always reminded of President Martti Ahtisaari going down into a bunker about 10 years ago, trying to persuade people that weapons had to be put beyond use. There were some very difficult things that governments had to do. People who had committed awful crimes and had been sentenced to long terms of imprisonment were released. They were released on licence – that is, if they ever committed another crime, they would go back in. Interestingly, only one person has ever been brought back to prison and had their term handed back to them. Though difficult, peace ultimately has to be made on an inclusive basis.

Trust

The most fundamental issue is trust. You have to build up trust with the other side, and this can be in very small steps. It is the acceptance of difference, acceptance that the other side has a point that is worthwhile listening to. I am proud of the fact that I was the first Irish



The panel members who participated in the British Academy's discussion meeting on 31 January 2011 were: the former President of Finland, Martti Ahtisaari; Francesc Vendrell, a Spanish diplomat with many years of service in the United Nations; Dáithí O'Ceallaigh, former Ambassador of Ireland to London; Lord David Owen, former UK Foreign Secretary. The discussion was chaired by Professor Marianne Elliott FBA. On 1 February the panel reconvened at the Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool: (back row) Dáithí O'Ceallaigh, Professor Jon Saunders (Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Liverpool), Francesc Vendrell, David Owen; (front row) Martti Ahtisaari, Marianne Elliott.

ambassador to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph to honour the Irish dead in the ANZAC armies. I was also the first Irish ambassador to attend the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday to honour the Irish dead in the British Army. Gestures like that can make a difference.

When the Irish government bought the site of the Battle of the Boyne – and those of you who know anything about Ireland will know how important the Battle of the Boyne is for Unionists – the government determined that they would develop the site in a way that both communities could accept. It was opened by the then Irish Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, and Dr Ian Paisley, who was then the First Minister in Northern Ireland, came down for the opening. When the Taoiseach asked Dr Paisley how he was getting on, Dr Paisley surprised him by saying he was beginning to trust Mr Adams.

Respect

I think another requirement for peace is respect. We may not like what the other person thinks, we may not agree with what

they think, but we should respect their views and seek to work with them in a joint endeavour.

Am I hopeful about the future in Northern Ireland? Yes. Do the differences between the two communities remain? Yes. Politically, the system put in place is a very complicated one. In time, it may well change. There are people in Northern Ireland who are opposed to it. There is a small group of dissident IRA who are determined to use the same sort of bombs, killings and murders that the Provisional IRA used for over 30 years. But they do not, and hopefully never will, have the same roots in the community as the Provisional IRA had.

In Ireland, we have an organisation called the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which culturally is very much a nationalist organisation and, historically, you would never have Unionists playing in GAA games. About two weeks ago, a young woman who was the daughter of the manager of the County Tyrone GAA club, was murdered on her honeymoon in Mauritius. There was a wake in the family home. Every single member of the Government of Northern

Ireland, including the four or five DUP members, went to that wake. Those of you who know something about Northern Ireland will know that the Shankill, traditionally, is a hotbed of unionism and loyalism. A loyalist paramilitary who had served time arrived at the wake to pay his respects. He brought his respects on behalf of the Shankill. This would never have happened five years ago. There is, then, hope in Northern Ireland.

Dáithí O'Ceallaigh was an Irish diplomat whose career spanned more than 35 years. He held posts in Moscow, London, Belfast, New York, Finland and Estonia, before serving as Ambassador to London for 6 years from 2001. He retired from the Foreign Service in 2009, and is currently Director General of the Institute of International and European Affairs, in Dublin.

Audio recordings of the British Academy panel discussion may be found via www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary
