

The Good Friday Agreement, Ten Years On

On 5 November 2008, the Institute of Irish Studies at Liverpool University hosted a panel discussion, in partnership with the British Academy. The panel brought together key players who had brokered the 1998 Agreement, with others who are currently involved in the long-term process of cementing peace by facilitating reconciliation. The event was opened by Lord David Owen, Chancellor of the University. It was chaired by the Director of the Institute, **Professor Marianne Elliott FBA**, who served on one of the peace commissions preceding the Good Friday Agreement, and continues to write on issues underlying the conflict: here she reports on the evening's discussion. The event attracted a capacity audience of nearly 200 members of the public, the academic community and students. The previous weekend the homecoming parade of Royal Irish Regiment soldiers from Afghanistan had highlighted the tensions and problems remaining and a number of speakers referred to it in their comments.

Lord Owen opened the proceedings by drawing on his own experiences in conflict zones and describing the various peace lectures and programmes organised by the Institute of Irish Studies over the past decade. Given the current reality, whereby it is the extremes (Sinn Féin and the DUP) who are sharing power in Northern Ireland, seemingly

having walked away with the spoils, he drew attention to the problem of middle parties such as the SDLP and Ulster Unionists being sidelined, and called for a secondary mechanism to be opened up to broaden the political spectrum.

Jonathan Powell had been Tony Blair's Chief of Staff. He had been central to brokering the Good Friday Agreement, and maintained contact with the contesting parties through to the successful decommissioning of IRA weapons and the setting up of the devolved power-sharing structures of 2007. His perseverance had shown the importance of continuity of personnel in bringing conflicts to an end. On 5 November he delivered what Dr Maurice Hayes called 'a master-class on peace negotiating'. He was keen to stress that Northern Ireland was not similar to other conflict zones and much of his experience in ending the war was not transferable. That said, he believed that Northern Ireland offered key lessons in conflict resolution.

The first was to understand fully the history of the conflict and accept that peace, as with the Good Friday Agreement, might be 'an agreement to disagree'. Secondly, ending conflict is a process. Whatever the troughs and pain along the way, it should be kept going, giving hope that it will eventually

break through. In the Middle East the absence of a clear process allowed the Oslo Accord to unravel.

Thirdly, an element of 'constructive ambiguity' helped. But there are dangers to the necessary vagueness, and he pointed to a key speech by Tony Blair which terminated the vagueness and the unravelling which had started to happen. Fourthly, 'strong facilitators' are needed: it is sovereign governments which can make things happen, Britain in the case of Northern Ireland, the US in the Middle East. Fifthly, both sides need to accept that there is no military solution. The fact that this had already happened in the 1970s in Northern Ireland is a grim reminder of what a long haul peace-building can be. The Sri Lankan Government, he thought, had thrown away its peace-initiative by thinking it could actually defeat the Tamil Tigers. Lastly, you should always keep the door open to your enemies – as the British Government had to the IRA – even Al Quaida. He also thought that peace in Northern Ireland was brought about by a number of remarkable leaders: Mo Mowlam, David Trimble, Gerry Adams, Ian Paisley and Tony Blair, whose 'messianic zeal', whilst often criticised, was needed in Northern Ireland.

Dr Maurice Hayes (former Northern Ireland Ombudsman, member of the Patten Commission on policing) applauded those who had brokered the Good Friday Agreement and made daily life so much better for people in Northern Ireland. He traced the building-blocks, the handing-on of the baton from the time of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the key players who had done so, including John Major and Peter Brooke. He recognised the problems and difficulties, and thought the major victory for Unionism (in having the Union recognised by all parties to the negotiations) was undersold to its supporters by its leaders. Sinn Féin had sacrificed far



Figure 1: Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, US Senator George Mitchell, and Minister Tony Blair shake hands after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998. Photo: Dan Chung/AFP/Getty Images.

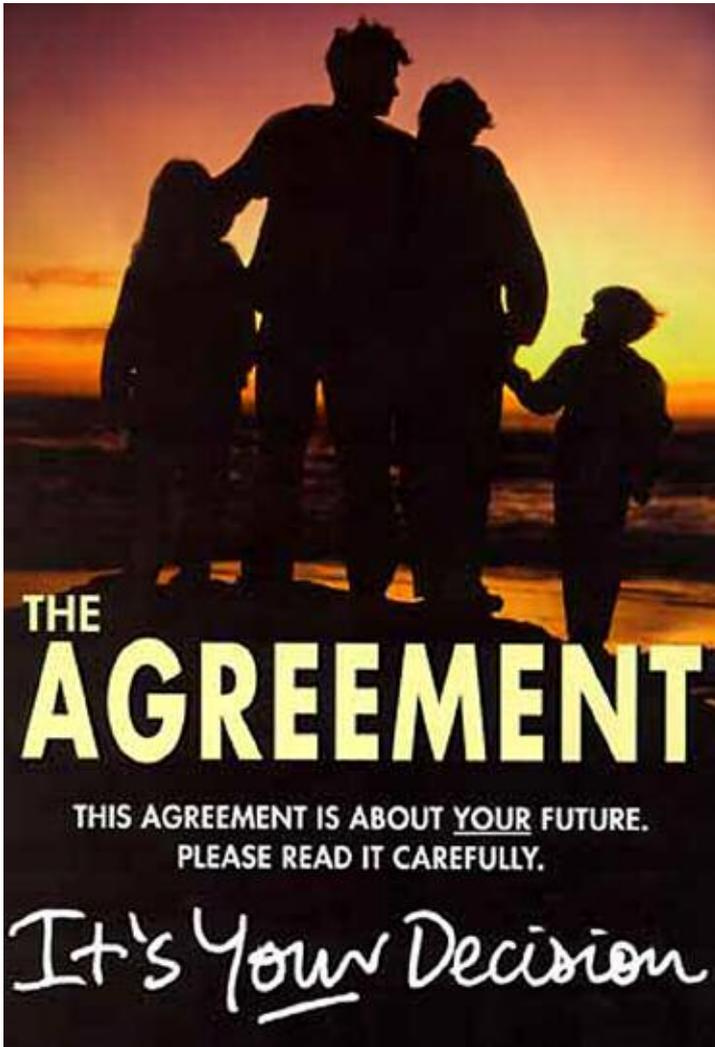


Figure 2:
The Agreement,
published ahead
of the May 1998
referendum.

Discussion then moved on from the high politics of peacemaking and the historic nature of what had been achieved in 1998, to the festering problems which remain, notably sectarianism. In both Duncan Morrow's and Malachi O'Doherty's presentations (and in the open discussion which followed), there were calls to the sovereign governments not to step away and assume that peace had been achieved. **Dr Duncan Morrow**, former academic, now Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, posited a choice between 'truce' and 'transformation', and he felt less optimistic than he had done a year ago. He thought the history of Northern Ireland had been one of 'containment', allowing Britain and Ireland to walk away, leaving those inside to deal with the problem. In the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement he warned that devolution was a 'truce' rather than 'transformation', and that the agreement to disagree had not created sufficient agreement. There was an absence of a shared vision, a tendency to speak in 'green' or 'orange' terms, where levels of historic hatred can be easily rekindled. He paid tribute to the remarkable transformation brought about in policing by the Patten Commission (1999). But there had been little else since, and he concluded by applying the idea of a Gramscian moment to the current state of the peace process in Northern Ireland: 'the old is dead, but the new is not yet born.'

more and he pointed to an under-applauded achievement for which Sinn Féin should be given credit: the breaking of the age-old cycle of republican violence without a major split. He agreed that the politicians needed to act more responsibly by taking responsibility, rather than creating a political vacuum. And (citing Sinn Féin protests at the soldiers' homecoming parade) he criticised them for not allowing to others the 'parity of esteem' they demanded for themselves. But he was optimistic, for he thought the extremes had moved to the centre.

David Cooney, Irish Ambassador to the UK and before that to the United Nations, felt it important to emphasise that the constitutional issue (i.e. whether Northern Ireland should remain British or be re-united with the rest of Ireland) was no longer ambiguous. It was not 'parked'. The Good Friday Agreement

had explicitly declared that you could be British, Irish or both in Northern Ireland; that it was for the people of Northern Ireland to decide their future and thereafter for those North and South to do so. And since the Unionist tradition was that of the majority, it may have looked as if they had won. In fact everyone had, but the *quid pro quo* for Unionism was that Northern Ireland had to change, and he thought the removal of symbols, the devolution of policing and the passage of an Irish Language Act were taking far too long. None, he explained, involved a diminution of Britishness. On the other hand, he too was critical of how republicans had rejected the army's right to its homecoming parade. Despite the hiccups, he drew attention to another major gain of the Good Friday Agreement: the huge improvement in British-Irish relations. 'I am,' he admitted, 'the luckiest Irish Ambassador ever to hold the job.'

The idea that we may have achieved peace but not transformation was taken a stage further by Belfast journalist, writer and broadcaster, **Malachi O'Doherty**. Could violence return, he asked? He thought that we should not be too complacent in thinking that it would not. The Good Friday Agreement was a miracle, but there have been few since. Dangerous sectarianism was still in the air and the 'sectarian needling' of each other by Sinn Féin and the DUP was conflict by other means. Neither, he thought, was showing sufficient consideration for the problems of the other. He then analysed in detail the event which had been raised by several other panellists: the very tense situation which had developed around the Royal Irish Regiment parade the previous weekend. Here Sinn Féin had played the sectarian card by calling a counter parade. As a result, where perhaps only several hundred

army supporters might have attended the parade, 30,000 did so, a dangerous clash only being averted by the paramilitaries policing their own sides. It was a sharp reminder that the underlying causes of the conflict remain

combustible and sectarianism is rife. The main churches may now be preaching reconciliation, but, as Malachi O'Doherty explained, the evangelical supporters of the DUP remain outside ecumenism.

In the open discussion which followed, there was some bridging of the gap that seemed to have opened up between the sustained political and diplomatic activities which had produced the Good Friday Agreement miracle, and the reality of continuing communal tensions on the ground. The fear that the British and Irish governments would turn their back on the province was calmed. Even so, it was up to the parties themselves to make the deal, though they needed reminding that the deal was a trust and not theirs to wreck. They needed to move beyond playing to their side's gallery (and fears), instead selling the Good Friday Agreement as having made Northern Ireland a better place to live. Ultimately, as Maurice Hayes concluded, people's insecurities needed calming by hundreds of small acts; these needed championing from the top and he thought we should not underestimate what is going on at this level.



Figure 3: Participants at the panel discussion. Back row, left to right: Jonathan Powell, Duncan Morrow, David Cooney, Maurice Hayes, Tim Brassell (British Academy, Director of External Relations). Front row, left to right: David Owen, Marianne Elliott (Chair), Malachi O'Doherty.

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