

UPF Ireland: Belfast / Good Friday Agreement Anniversary

Keith Best
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Video of Speech youtu.be/UXL1ewVhi4s

During my time as an MP I served with and was able to observe figures such as John Hume, David Trimble, Seamus Mallon and, of course, Revd Ian Paisley. I have been attentive to the situation in Northern Ireland for more than forty years and these are very much my personal reflections. At Oxford in the late 1960s I knew Robert Nairac, killed in 1977 by the [Provisional IRA](#) on his fourth tour of duty in [Northern Ireland](#) and whose body has never been found. His parents went to their graves without knowing where their son lies and friends of his mother said that his death and the circumstances surrounding it never left her.

My very first elected position on entering Parliament in 1979 was to become Secretary of the Conservative Northern Ireland Committee which was chaired at the time by the late Sir John Biggs-Davison who wrote the book *The Hand is Red* which traces the history of Ireland, notably in the 20th century and was somewhat unusual in being a staunch Unionist and also a Roman Catholic. I visited Lurgan shortly afterwards and was shocked to find in a part of my country an army post sandbagged from floor to ceiling with nets across the top against projectiles. Lurgan and the associated towns of Portadown and Craigavon made up part of what was known as the "murder triangle"; an area known for a significant number of incidents and fatalities during [The Troubles](#).

I am mindful that as we note the 25 years Anniversary Belfast/Good Friday Agreement we also recall the more dolorous anniversary of the Omagh car bombing on 15 August 1998 after the signing of the Agreement that killed 29 people and injured about 220 others, making it Northern Ireland's worst atrocity. It caused widespread outrage and, from the bombers' perspective, was counter intuitive as it spurred on the peace process. The Real IRA denied that the bomb was intended to kill civilians and apologised and shortly afterwards declared a ceasefire. In the aftermath both the British and Irish Parliaments passed draconian new measures which included allowing suspected members of terrorist groups to be convicted on the word of a senior police officer, curtailment of the [right to silence](#), and longer detention periods. The memorial stands on the site to this day.

What can we learn on this anniversary of the ending of the Troubles which lasted for 30 years, dominated my political lifetime and in which some 3,500 people were killed in the conflict, of whom 52% were [civilians](#), 32% were members of the British security forces and 16% were members of paramilitary groups? It is the tradition in Ireland to look back in history rather than forwards so for many alive today that period is still raw with grief and a sense of unresolved recrimination. On my last visit to the Peace Walk in Londonderry I walked to Free Derry Corner, saw the memorials and the slogans as though those times were still very much current. We heard from and met the son of Patrick Doherty, aged 31, who was shot from behind while attempting to crawl to safety in the forecourt of Rossville Flats on Bloody Sunday on 30 January 1972 and whose name is the first listed on the memorial of the 13 who were killed that day. Somehow, it seemed like yesterday. Yet it took the next 38 years for the Saville report to be made public in 2010 which concluded that the killings were "unjustified" and "unjustifiable". It found that all of those shot were unarmed, that none were posing a serious threat, that no bombs were thrown and that soldiers "knowingly put forward false accounts" to justify their firing. The soldiers denied shooting the named

victims but also denied shooting anyone by mistake. Only on the publication of the report did the [British Prime Minister David Cameron](#) formally apologise. The people of Ireland have had to get used to delayed justice with much of it still unfulfilled. Having served in airborne forces myself I am saddened that such a blot should besmirch their name.

It is right, also, that I should acknowledge here that the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2022-2023, for which Royal Assent is imminent, will leave many dissatisfied ending, as it does, any further legal proceedings concerning Troubles-related conduct and providing conditional immunity from prosecution for those who cooperate with investigations conducted by the newly to be established Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery. Amnesty International has commented that "The UK government are letting people get away with murder and blocking victims in the UK from getting justice. The law - known as the Troubles Act - is deeply damaging and will cause untold distress to victims."

I can only express the hope, however, that if this does, indeed, lead to many unsolved deaths and injuries being resolved and information brought forward which may comfort those who still remain ignorant of what happened to their loved ones then something will have been achieved, albeit in some eyes at the expense of justice. When I was Chief Executive of the charity Freedom from Torture, which cares for torture survivors, one of our Patrons was Eric Lomax who wrote *The Railway Man* which was turned into a film of that name. His involvement with Freedom from Torture gave him a form of freedom and in his own words "For the first time I was able to unload the hate that had become my prison." I was privileged to know Eric, now sadly dead, whose torture as a prisoner of war at the hands of the Japanese and, in particular, one interrogator and tormentor left him with an enduring hatred of the Japanese to the extent that he would leave a restaurant if a Japanese person entered. By chance discovery of the identity of his torturer and their subsequent meeting he saw the deep regret in that man and they became good acquaintances and correspondents. He states in his book "After our meeting I felt I'd come to some kind of peace and resolution. Forgiveness is possible when someone is ready to accept forgiveness. Some time the hating has to stop."

We should recall that the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement encompassed not only the political parties in Northern Ireland (the Multi-Party Agreement) but both the British and Irish Governments (the British - Irish Agreement) and was endorsed by referenda in both Northern Ireland and the Republic. It gave birth to Northern Ireland's present [devolved](#) system of government on the basis of power-sharing. It included acceptance of the [principle of consent](#), commitment to [civil and political rights](#), [cultural parity of esteem](#), [police reform](#), [paramilitary disarmament](#) and early release of paramilitary prisoners, followed by [demilitarisation](#). The agreement also created a number of institutions between Northern Ireland and [Ireland](#) ("North - South") and between Ireland and the [United Kingdom](#) ("East - West"). It involved constitutional changes ([Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland](#)) to facilitate it, it was subject to the consent of the people of both jurisdictions to give effect to it and it came into force on 2 December 1999. As part of the agreement, the [British Parliament](#) repealed the [Government of Ireland Act 1920](#) (which had established Northern Ireland, [partitioned Ireland](#) and asserted a territorial claim over all of Ireland) and for their part the people of the Republic of Ireland amended [Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution of Ireland](#) which had asserted a territorial claim over Northern Ireland. These were fundamental changes and have fostered collaboration on various issues including healthcare, infrastructure and environmental protection. This cross-border partnership has been instrumental in addressing common challenges and fostering greater regional integration.

Clearly, there remains some unfinished business but the cessation of violence is tangible. We must now see if there can be true reconciliation. The establishment of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which works to ensure that human rights are upheld and respected for all citizens, has been crucial in fostering a culture of respect for individual liberties and equality. The end of violence and increased political stability has enabled Northern Ireland to experience economic growth; businesses have flourished, tourism has boomed and foreign investments have poured in. The peace dividend has created a more favourable environment for job creation and economic prosperity. The peace brought about by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement has allowed for greater educational and cultural exchange. Students from diverse backgrounds can now engage in cross-community programs, fostering understanding and reconciliation among the youth. Additionally, cultural initiatives have flourished, highlighting the rich diversity of Northern Ireland's heritage. Northern Ireland's natural beauty and historical landmarks have become more accessible to tourists since the end of violence. Sites like the Giant's Causeway, the Titanic Belfast museum, and the historic city of Derry/Londonderry have seen a significant increase in visitors, boosting the local economy and cultural awareness. I have been one of them. The peace process has encouraged greater community engagement and grassroots activism. Civil society organizations have played a vital role in building bridges between communities, promoting dialogue, and addressing issues such as mental health, education, and social integration.

An important lesson is that there would not have been any agreement at all had it not been for dialogue behind the scenes - a point made forcefully by Lord Alderdice, former Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly. While publicly stating that there could be no discussion with terrorists we know that John

Major's Government was, indeed, talking to the IRA for months before it became public in November 1993. There are messages here for the situation in Afghanistan and elsewhere about the importance of dialogue even with those in respect of whom such engagement seems repulsive.

I appreciate that in an audience and location where the shadow of the Troubles still looms large over everyone, it is delicate to urge the closing of a terrible chapter that the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement represents but the alternative is too awful to contemplate. Despite the continuing sense of loss and lack of closure (which the new legislation may well help remedy albeit at the expense of the perception of unfulfilled justice) a line has to be drawn. Forgiveness cannot be imposed by the community or legislation, it has to be a personal choice.

Yet experience shows from so many examples in history, especially from Holocaust survivors, that continuing hatred is a cancer that destroys those who harbour it and does not affect the perpetrator. As Eric Lomax wrote "For the first time I was able to unload the hate that had become my prison."

The impact of an act of forgiveness, however, can be dramatic on the perpetrator. In October 1984 I was at the Conservative Party Conference when my Parliamentary colleague Anthony Berry and four others were killed by the IRA by the [Brighton hotel bomb](#) which was planted by [Patrick Magee](#). Anthony Berry's daughter, Jo, is now a British peace activist and public speaker. Following her father's death, rather than nurturing what would have been an understandable loathing of his killers she committed her life to peaceful resolution and mediation of conflict. In 1999, after the release from prison, under the terms of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, of Patrick Magee (who had been given eight life sentences and a minimum of 35 years but served 14 years) she met him publicly in November 2000 in an effort at achieving reconciliation as envisioned in the wake of the Belfast/[Good Friday Agreement](#) and went on to meet him several times. These meetings over ten months formed the basis of a BBC documentary first broadcast on 13 December 2001. Subsequently, she spoke at St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, in the City of London which had been destroyed by the IRA in 1993 and she has appeared with Patrick Magee on many platforms. Her reconciliation work was featured in the film [Beyond Right and Wrong](#). Patrick Magee was described by the judge as "a man of exceptional cruelty and inhumanity" and he continues to defend his role in the bomb blast but he has expressed remorse for the loss of innocent lives. In his book in 2021 *Where Grieving Begins: Building Bridges after the Brighton Bomb - a Memoir* he chronicles the profound experience of meeting Jo and the extraordinary work they have done together.

A survivor of the bomb, Harvey Thomas, whom I remember well as one of Margaret Thatcher's close advisers and spin-doctors and who died last year, forgave Patrick Magee in 1998 and had since then developed a friendship with him, including hosting him in his own home, citing his [Christian faith](#) as the reason why he felt compelled to forgive.

The Investment Monitor on 10 May 2021 featured an article entitled "What is the real value of the Good Friday Agreement?" It referred to the fact that Northern Ireland had already come a long way pre-Covid and pre-Brexit. It mentioned how Reginald Maudling, a Conservative Home Secretary in the early 1970s, famously said at the end of his visit to the Province: "For God's sake bring me a large Scotch, what a bloody awful country!" Today's Northern Ireland has seen huge progress in both its society and economy, with vast improvements across its tourism sector, education levels and quality of life. The article asks what credit is due to the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (or GFA) with regards to this improved economic outlook and general transformation? What lessons can be learned from these successes that can be reapplied to solidify the future of Northern Ireland's industries and for its people, for their quality of life? It quotes Dr Eamonn O'Kane, a reader in conflict studies at the University of Wolverhampton and author of a number of books on Northern Ireland, "The peace process emerged slowly, and in many respects, surprisingly. There were two tracks running at the same time: you have got the so-called constitutional talks between the main constitutional parties in Northern Ireland, ie the ones that don't advocate or support the use of violence (sometimes called 'the bookmaking talks'). Then, unbeknownst at the time, there was also another process under way, often referred to as 'the backchannel process'. This is where, at one remove, the British government were speaking to people close to the IRA and Sinn Fein. These two strands came together around 1993. "The big thing about the peace process, certainly in the early days leading up from the early to mid-1990s, up until the GFA in 1998, is the underpinning pragmatism of the process. It was about trying to persuade those who were using violence to stop."

As to Northern Ireland's appeal to investors and businesses economist Esmond Birnie explains that this impact and influence is very ambiguous. "It is impossible to prove [what the impact of the GFA has been] because the connections are all so complex," he states. "It is the classic problem with economics, you can't run experiments, you can't see what would happen in the absence of something else."

What can be deduced, however, is that Northern Ireland has certainly seen recovery and growth across a range of socio-economic indicators, although Birnie highlights that a lot of these trends were present before the agreement was signed. He states "If you look at indicators such as inward investment, the number of tourists coming to Northern Ireland, and the general growth of the economy, there were signs

that things were speeding up before 1998, in the earlier part of the 1990s."

One symbolic trend that had taken root in the early 1990s was the rise in integrated, mixed faith schools across Northern Ireland. Before the GFA was signed, between 1991 and 1998, the number of integrated schools saw its quickest rate of increase. This growth continued, albeit at a slightly slower rate, up until 2016, which is the last time there were gains by this measure.

Since 1999, the number of hotel rooms in Northern Ireland has almost doubled from 4,893 to 9,548. Before the Covid-19 lockdowns made their presence felt, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency reported that there had been steady growth in overall tourism between 2013 and 2019. In fact, between 2018 and 2019 there was an 8% increase in overall visitor spend when compared year on year.

Northern Ireland's tourism sector has also received a boost from the country's recent successes in the film-making sector, an industry that was all but non-existent before the violence was effectively shut down by the GFA.

During the peace talks and in the initial aftermath of the GFA, non-Northern Ireland-born student enrolment into universities was dwindling. Between 1996 and 2001 it decreased by 24.5%. Although there has been some volatility, this has seen a general upward trend since 2001 up until 2019, increasing by 83.5%. The number of non-Northern Irish students enrolling has more than doubled during that time.

More recently, Northern Ireland has seen significant growth in the number of foreigners making the country their home. Between 2004 and 2019, there was an overall increase of 56.8%. This stands in contrast to Northern Ireland losing many of its best and brightest to the UK mainland and other countries during the Troubles, as young adults sought to escape the violence and seek out job opportunities that were denied to them back home.

Dr Eamonn O'Kane summarises as follows: "If you want to be very macro about it, the social and economic impacts are visible for anybody to see. You have only got to walk around Belfast and the Titanic Quarter in the new investment area. I am often struck by this whenever I go back over there, that it feels far more prosperous, far more developed and obviously far more peaceful.

"The obvious infrastructure of the Troubles is gone. You no longer have the very fortified police stations. Going into Belfast city centre, you don't have the security gates, all of that is very different. So, on a macro level, the social impact is significant."

The Agreement is currently being put to the test. The impact of Brexit and, in particular, the Northern Ireland Protocol has stretched relationships and loyalties. In 1998 both Ireland and the UK were member states of the EU. That is no longer the case and this has created tension. Stormont is not functioning, the Unionists feel under threat and the future of power-sharing is uncertain. We can but hope that the Agreement and the desire for peace will survive both these tensions and any move towards constitutional change.

It would be wrong, offensive and inaccurate to pretend that good can come from tragedy but it is also right that we should acknowledge how, sometimes, such dark events can lead to unexpected consequences which can give hope for the future. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement serves as a global model for conflict resolution and reconciliation. It has been studied and admired by nations facing their own internal conflicts, offering hope that even the most entrenched disputes can be peacefully resolved through dialogue and compromise. It stands as a testament to the power of diplomacy, compromise, and the human spirit's capacity for positive change. It has transformed Northern Ireland from a place of conflict and division into a beacon of hope and reconciliation. Peace is a journey, not a destination. While challenges remain, the progress made thus far is a testament to the enduring commitment of the people of Northern Ireland and the international community to building a better future.

END

Event Programme:

"Good Friday Agreement at 25, implications for Interfaith Peace and Reconciliation"

1:00 p.m. - 1:30 p.m.: Short walk from Stormont Hotel to Assembly point at Stormont Park (Grounds of Parliament Building) followed by interfaith prayer readings from Mrs. Marissa Goldstone-Leavold (Baptist), Mr. Sudhansh Verma (Hindu), Mr. Diadeen Ahmed (Islam), Mrs. Linda Ervine MBE (Presbyterian), Catriona O'Higgins-Thiebault (Catholic).

LUNCH The Good Friday Agreement

1:45 p.m. - 2:20 p.m.: Hot buffet lunch with Opening address from Emcee Mr. Colm Ó Cionnaith, UPF

Ireland Secretary General, "Celebrating 25 Years of the Good Friday Agreement".

2:20 p.m. - 2:50 p.m.: Hon Keith Best, Chair of UPF UK Board of Trustees will give a keynote address.

2:50 p.m. - 3:10 p.m.: Professor Omar Escalona, keynote address: "A Global Peace Road Perspective of the NI-GB Tunnel/Bridge Project: Towards a Sustainable Peaceful and Freedom Compliant Humanity"
New Irish/Northern Irish Perspectives

3:10 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.: Cllr Yemi Adenuga (Meath County Council) will give a keynote address.

3:30 p.m. - 3:45 p.m.: Ms. Roos Demol, Co-founder and CEO of International Community Dynamics will give an overview of her work

3:45 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. INTERMISSION (Tea/Coffee Break)

UPF Principles of Peace, Q and A, Appointing of new UPF Peace Ambassadors

4:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m. Dr. David Hanna, UPF North Europe President "Overview of UPF Principles of Peace".

4:30 p.m. - 4:45 p.m. Questions, contributions, and observations from the floor to the speaker's panel