

Northern Ireland - The Way Forward

The Rt Hon John Spellar MP
Minister for Northern Ireland

National Europe Centre Paper No. 122

Presented at the National Europe Centre, The Australian National
University, Canberra, 18 March, 2004.

It's a great pleasure to be in Canberra today and to have this opportunity to address what was, in many ways, one of the most apparently intractable and neuralgic problems in the politics of Britain, Ireland and, I think it fair to say, international politics.

I say 'was' not because the issues that cost the lives of over 3,000 people in the most recent phase of what is euphemistically called the 'Troubles' have been finally and permanently resolved.

They have not, let's be frank about it.

But I am convinced that the resolution is in sight.

I became directly involved in Northern Ireland in 1994/95 as Shadow spokesman.

If you had asked then about the 'way forward' you would have got more 'hope' than 'confidence'.

If you had asked about the 'way forward' 20 years before that I'm not sure that you would even have got hope.

But we can now talk about a 'Way Forward' for Northern Ireland.

On April 10th, 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was signed in Belfast.

In Britain – here in Australia – and around the World, newspaper headlines declared that Northern Ireland's bloody conflict was over, that a political settlement was now in place, and that Protestants and Catholics – Unionists and Nationalists – could live together in peace.

It was never going to be that simple: as Abba Eban perceptively noted, 'Peace is a process not an event'.

Even an agreement signed by men and women who were not just political rivals but often sworn enemies, could not in itself erase thirty years of fear, hatred and bloodshed.

And even though voted for with an overwhelming majority by the people of Ireland – North and South – the Agreement alone could not guarantee stability in Northern Ireland.

It could not guarantee peace.

It could not guarantee reconciliation.

No, the Agreement could not - and cannot - guarantee any of those things.

But it is the route map toward them.

It is the Good Friday Agreement that over the last six years has guided Northern Ireland's footsteps to greater stability, peace and reconciliation than we have seen for generations.

No one would pretend that the path has been smooth so far.

The Northern Ireland Assembly – the devolved parliament envisaged in the Agreement - has been suspended now for almost 18 months. It was suspended because of a breakdown in trust between the parties who signed up to the agreement - it was suspended because the IRA has refused to go away.

They, and other republican and loyalist paramilitary groups, have continued to gather intelligence, to procure arms, to target individuals, and to mete out rough justice with so-called punishment beatings.

Those activities were supposed to have been consigned to history by the signing of the agreement and it was their continuation which led Unionist politicians to walk away from coalition with

Sinn Fein, the republican party which is inextricably linked to the Provisional IRA.

However, we remain optimistic that we can restore the devolved institutions of government.

And that optimism is based on two things; the underlying strength of the agreement, and the determination of the people of Northern Ireland that they will not allow the clock to be turned back.

Because, for all the difficulties of the last six years, Northern Ireland has made great and considerable progress.

Devolution was working in Northern Ireland.

It put responsibility for local issues into the hands of local politicians who are locally accountable. And it saw parties on opposite sides of the political and religious divide working constructively for the future of their country - delivering better schools and hospitals, improving the fabric of their lives, and the chances for the children's lives.

That kind of partnership government was inconceivable just a few years ago' inconceivable before the signing of the Belfast Agreement.

And even as I speak today, politicians who once would not even talk to one another, are sitting down together to review the Good Friday Agreement, attempting to resolve their differences and to restore the Assembly and bring long term political stability to Northern Ireland.

The Good Friday Agreement has had an impact that has extended far beyond politics and the machinery of government.

Since 1998 the progress of the Northern Ireland economy and society has been remarkable.

There are now more people in work in Northern Ireland than there has ever been. Over the last five years Northern Ireland has created jobs at double the rate of the rest of the UK.

Manufacturing is another area where Northern Ireland has bucked the trend: Between 1998 and 2003 manufacturing output in Northern Ireland increased by 28% - compared to a fall of 2% in the UK as a whole.

Unemployment at its worst was around 15 per cent, now it is around five per cent. That is a transformation.

And exports by Northern Ireland manufacturing companies have grown in the same period by 30% or £919 million.

Most striking perhaps, because there is such an element of choice involved, is the growth of Tourism. During the 1970's just under 400,000 people a year visited Northern Ireland. Last year that figure stood at over 1.7 million – that's more people coming to Northern Ireland than live there, making Belfast the 4th most visited city in the UK.

Restaurants, bars and shops have sprung up across the province, the Belfast city skyline reveals the outlines of new, landmark buildings, and there is much, much more to come – a major shopping centre - £400 million – a Dutch developer, funded by a German insurance company.

Those changes have not come about as a direct consequence of the Good Friday Agreement and of the peace which it promises.

But there are, of course, still great challenges facing Northern Ireland but I know that great strength is drawn from the realisation that those challenges are not faced alone.

The Irish Government are our partners in working to bring peace and prosperity to Northern Ireland.

And there is a deep and constant reservoir of goodwill that we can draw on not least from our European partners and it is right that I pay tribute to that in the National Europe Centre tonight.

That support goes well beyond warm words and kind thoughts, important as those are.

The practical projects that the EU Peace I and Peace II projects have promoted and supported make a real and lasting difference where it matters, in people's daily lives.

The EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation has targeted social need in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic to the tune of £340m of which some 80% was allocated to projects in NI.

And the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation—Peace II—is a unique EU funded programme also for Northern Ireland and the border counties.

Its aim is to promote reconciliation and help build a more peaceful and stable society. £500m has been allocated and the programme is managed by the Special EU Programmes Body, which is one of the six cross-border bodies set up under the Good Friday Agreement.

Let me give you a flavour of the important work that is being supported.

The Junior Achievements Project focuses on the border counties of Ireland and works with over 5000 children in 50 schools each year to improve the life skills of disadvantaged young people

and help prepare them for a successful transition from education to further training or work.

The 'Waterside' and 'Second Chance' Projects in Derry promote peace and reconciliation through training within disadvantaged communities.

These projects offer a foundation upon which young people can progress to further education or enter the employment market.

Communities from across the divide in Derry are brought together and as well as benefiting from training, the participants from both centres come together in group activities that explores peace and reconciliation and other matters relating to cultural diversity.

And in Belfast, on one of the interfaces that has historically experienced the most horrendous problems, the Springfield Inter-Community Development Programme works to promote greater understanding and the reduction of community divisions along the Springfield, Falls and Shankill Roads.

Just three examples of immensely important work with European support at its core.

Of course, peace is the most important measure of the success of the Agreement. And no one can persuade me that on that measure too we have not seen remarkable achievement.

While we cannot - and will not - forget the names and the faces of those who were killed in the 30 years of conflict we should neither forget that, despicable as they still are, murders in modern Northern Ireland are counted now in single figures not hundreds.

In 1972, at the height of the Troubles, paramilitary violence accounted for the death of 497 people.

Last year 12 people were killed due to paramilitary violence. Twelve too many, of course, but a tragic and perverse indicator of progress.

That is not hype, it's not spin or blarney – it's reality. And it is a reality born out of the Belfast Agreement, brokered by a British Labour government and endorsed by the politicians and people of Northern Ireland.

Of course I accept that there are those who see another reality

Those who have a perverted fixed view of the world in which the 'other side' has no place.

Both violent republicanism and violent loyalism are prisoners of this poisonous mindset.

Those who once in some perverse way posed as defenders of their communities now exploit them with ruthless cruelty.

They are up to their necks in organised crime: drug dealing, extortion, money laundering.

They have no 'cause' beyond cynical self-interest.

They are two sides of the same coin.

And they want to destroy the Agreement because the Agreement points to a Northern Ireland in which they will have no place.

In the summer of 1998, after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the Northern Ireland town of Omagh witnessed one of the gravest atrocities of the Troubles.

Those who planted the Omagh bomb succeeding in destroying the lives of more than 30 men, women and children.

Their evil act took the future from those people, but its aim was far greater.

They wanted to destroy the future for all the people of Northern Ireland. They wanted to condemn us to another thirty years of misery and murder.

And they want to do that because they are afraid. Afraid of a future built on the Good Friday Agreement: a future where the gunmen no longer command fear and respect, and where politics replaces paramilitaries once and for all.

We, and the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, are determined to not let them succeed.

The British and Irish governments will not let them.

And the World, perhaps seeing the terrorists of Northern Ireland with fresh eyes after the outrages at New York, Bali and elsewhere, *will not let them.*

The terrorists are yesterday's men. And the future of Northern Ireland, promised in the Good Friday Agreement, and realised over the last six years, *holds no place for them.*

The Agreement is the way forward.

The Belfast Agreement marked the beginning of a journey to a peaceful future for Northern Ireland. We are determined to make it to that journey's end.

The people of Northern Ireland deserve no less, and we are determined that they achieve no less.