

The Good Friday Agreement: where to now?

**Report of a conference organised by
Drogheda Cross-Border Focus**

23-25 September 2004

compiled by

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A special thanks to the invited speakers, who are listed below in order of appearance
(followed by the initials by which they are identified in the question and answer sessions):

Fidelma Carolan [FC]
Julitta Clancy [JC]
Nelson McCausland MLA [NMCC]
Danny Morrison [DM]
Senator Mary O'Rourke [MO'R]
Dr Sean Farren MLA [SF]
Senator Martin Mansergh [MM]
Mervyn Gibson [MG]
Michael Copeland MLA [MC]
Tony Kennedy [TK]

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Assembly, set up under the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement of 1998, is currently in suspension. With the most recent Assembly elections providing an increased vote for the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin (making each the leading political representatives of the Unionist and Nationalist communities respectively), the British and Irish governments held all-party discussions at Leeds Castle on the weekend of 17-19 September, in an attempt to reach agreement on two major issues: the completion of weapons decommissioning and the restoration of the power-sharing institutions. Although there were hints of a significant move being contemplated by the IRA, the talks ended in failure, a major obstacle being the changes demanded by the DUP regarding the mechanisms under which the Assembly operates. Behind-the-scenes discussions are currently taking place between the two governments and the political parties to see if an acceptable resolution can be found.

As part of their ongoing programme of cross-community reconciliation work, Drogheda Cross-Border Focus had already planned for a conference, debating the Good Friday Agreement, to take place in late September. Motivated by a desire for inclusivity, the speakers included members of the Women's Coalition, the UUP, DUP, SDLP and Sinn Féin, as well as Irish senators, a cross-border peace activist, a Protestant clergyman who works with Loyalists in Belfast, and the chief executive of one of the major peace and reconciliation organisations.

The conference was a three-day event, involving representatives of community groups from North and South. This pamphlet concerns itself with the final day, when the speakers mentioned above made their presentations. The day commenced with an overview of the setting up of the Good Friday Agreement from the perspective of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. The two panel sessions which followed were chaired respectively by Sam Smyth of the *Irish Independent* and Dr. John Coakley of the Institute of British-Irish Studies, UCD.

For reasons of space, and to enhance readability, the presentations have been reduced to half their original wordage. The organisers were impressed with the honesty and openness shown by the contributors. Their only regret was that, in the event, the day's programme did not allow sufficient time for as much audience interaction as had been initially envisaged. Nevertheless, it was felt to have been an important event, and certainly a topical one given the political situation in the aftermath of the Leeds Castle talks.

Sean Collins, Ide Lenihan, Paul Murphy, *Drogheda Cross-Border Focus*
Michael Hall, *Farset Community Think Tanks Project*

Welcome by Ide Lenihan (chair, Drogheda Cross-Border Focus)

Mayor, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is my privilege to welcome you here today as we debate ‘The Good Friday Agreement: where to now?’ That agreement was signed in April 1998 and it is only a week ago that the latest efforts to move matters forward took place in Leeds Castle, Kent. Our gathering here, then, is timely, especially given the political changes brought about by recent Assembly and European elections. The efforts to achieve a full, just and inclusive settlement must succeed, otherwise despair, the handmaiden of inaction, will take root. On behalf of Drogheda Cross-Border Focus it is our hope to foster friendships that will assist in bringing understanding between the various traditions that live on this island. I now call upon the Mayor, Alderman Gerald Nash, to formally open this conference and I hope that all who take part will gain from their participation.

Formal opening by the Mayor of Drogheda, Alderman Gerald Nash

It is an honour and privilege to be asked to open this conference. I know that the organisers – Sean Collins, Ide Lenihan and Paul Murphy – have put a considerable amount of time and effort into this event. Their contribution to cross-border community work has been ongoing for several years.

The Northern peace process often seems to be the preserve of high politics and top-level diplomacy. However, if the Belfast Agreement does not command widespread and meaningful public support on the ground and if its provisions cannot be worked by the communities on which its whole validity depends, it is not worth having an agreement at all. And although the peace process has become synonymous with politicians such as John Hume, Gerry Adams, David Trimble and Ian Paisley, the work of changing the mindsets of whole communities, preparing them for a new dispensation, has fallen to the community leaders of Northern Ireland, many of whom will be participating in this conference. These are the unsung heroes of the peace process. The efforts of many hundreds, if not thousands, of community workers, trade union activists and those in the voluntary sector, in working to bring about a real and lasting peace in the North often goes unnoticed by decision-makers and people in power and can sometimes be lost or obscured when the focus shifts to the latest top-level political crisis. This weekend I would ask that we all reflect on the unstinting hard work and commitment of those who have done the real work within their communities over many years to bring us to the stage we are at today.

This weekend, we will hear contributions from key players in the peace process, and senior political figures from the Republic will also give us their analysis of how best we can move the process forward. I sincerely hope that all parties, using the blueprint enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, can make the final push for a real and lasting peace that the vast majority of us on the island of Ireland gave our support to in 1998. Six years on, ladies and gentlemen, the time has come, I believe, to finally and definitively move on as a society together. Thank you.

Fidelma Carolan

(Co-chair of the Executive of the Northern Ireland's Women's Coalition)

I would like to give an overview of what I feel the Good Friday Agreement came out of, and why the Women's Coalition was formed; and also what contribution the Women's Coalition feel they made to the talks process and the Agreement itself. Then maybe look at some of the issues that we feel are very pertinent now as the talks continue, albeit without us.

The declarations of ceasefires by the IRA and Loyalists in 1994 brought a new political climate. As the British and Irish governments began to prepare the ground for a new round of peace negotiations, some women were worried that political talks would start only to founder once again. They also identified the paucity of women within mainstream politics as an issue of concern.

Within months of the ceasefires, the British and Irish governments published the Framework Document outlining their views on how accountable government in Northern Ireland could be achieved. The language adopted in the document talked about an 'accommodation of the two traditions' and provided the buzzwords of the peace process: identity, diversity, parity of esteem, pluralism, respect, inclusive relationships. However, the document left many women's organisations sceptical about how such concepts might translate into practice.

In June 1995 a conference attended by a wide range of women from over 200 organisations recommended that a clear strategy for the support and development of women's participation should be devised. In particular, the conference concluded that specific mechanisms were needed for women to become involved in any constitutional talks.

The two governments issued a Joint Communiqué in February 1996, proposing that elections be held to choose delegates to forthcoming Peace Talks and inviting parties to give their views on potential electoral systems.

Voluntary organisations were not specifically invited to respond, but many did so, including the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (NIWEP), who strongly advocated the adoption of an electoral system which would maximise the number of successful women candidates. Their paper also referred back to the emphasis placed in the Framework Document on parity of esteem and inclusion. Women, NIWEP argued, wanted everyone fully involved in determining the future of Northern Ireland, but were 'particularly conscious that they have not been included to date and wished to have this injustice redressed'.

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In March '96 the British government published their proposals, which recommended a hybrid, two-tiered list system of proportional representation that would elect 110 delegates to a Forum for Political Understanding and Dialogue. The Forum parties would then send delegates to the All-Party Talks. Frustrated at the lack of response to its earlier paper, NIWEP sent a new response to the proposals, stressing the need for an inclusive process and questioning the proposed designation of parties eligible to contest the election. NIWEP felt that the government had failed to allow the entry of representative groups, other than the established parties, into the negotiation and consultation process. They pointed out again the serious absence of women in party politics and argued that many women who had been active over the course of the Troubles had great difficulty in joining the existing parties. The suggestion that a women's network might contest the election was floated.

In the meantime, a partnership of organisations led by Bronagh Hinds, Chair of NIWEP, issued invitations to over 200 groups of women to attend a meeting in the Ulster People's College, to discuss what should be done to ensure women were represented at the Talks table. Over the course of the following week, NIWEP and others lobbied both governments furiously on the issue of a women's caucus or network contesting the election. Shortly before the People's College meeting, a fax was received from the Northern Ireland Office confirming that space had been reserved in the election for a women's party and asking for the party's full name. The consensus was to call it the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC).

At the first meeting, over 100 women turned up. After much discussion, the decision to stand was taken, though the decision was not unanimous. Several women were uncomfortable with the idea of a gender-specific party. Some spoke against a cross-community alliance, others against contesting this election. There were doubts about going ahead without a broader consensus amongst the wider 'activist' community. Nevertheless, the outcome of the meeting was that the majority of women attending agreed to form a Women's Coalition to fight the election.

At a second meeting, three core principles around which the NIWC would build its policies were identified: support for inclusion, equality and human rights. Papers setting out fundamental policies were circulated and much debated. And despite numerous difficulties, positions were finally agreed.

When Sydney Elliot, a lecturer at Queen's University, explained to us that a threshold of some 10,000 votes would guarantee two seats, I remember thinking: wow – we could really do this: 100 women standing, getting 100 votes each. Election headquarters in Belfast, Enniskillen and Derry were opened and advertisements seeking candidates were published, setting out two main criteria: candidates should have ideas on issues and problems facing their community and should be willing to seek a political accommodation inclusive of all interests.

As close of nominations 70 women had put themselves forward as candidates.

They were Catholic and Protestant, Unionist and Nationalist, Republican and Loyalist. They worked inside the home, and in business, in trade unionism, community, voluntary and education sectors. For the next six weeks women were knocking on doors, sticking up our ‘Wave Goodbye to the Dinosaurs’ posters and trying to convince people that we could offer something different – and telling them straight that if we were not elected the future of Northern Ireland would once again be decided by a group of men sitting around a table. At the election, the NIWC received the grand total of 7731 votes, enough to give Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sagar the mandate to bring some much needed oestrogen to the Talks table.

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At the Forum for Peace & Reconciliation both Monica and Pearl were ignored, talked over and frequently referred to in a derogatory manner. But the NIWC persisted, and stayed in the game while others stayed outside, voluntarily or through exclusion. This stood us in good stead for the negotiations around the Good Friday Agreement.

The primary motivation which led Coalition members to engage in politics was to achieve the inclusion of women. But solidarity on gender politics would only be effective if members were confident that their strong feelings on other aspects of rights and justice were taken into account in the process of creating policies. NIWC members, coming from different religious, cultural and political backgrounds were to find that they disagreed profoundly with each other over ways to resolve social and political problems. Therefore, most policies required long exchanges of ideas, hopes and fears, followed by drafting and redrafting to calm anxieties. By constantly revisiting its three guiding principles – human rights, equality and inclusion – the NIWC found itself equipped with the tools to benefit from the different perspectives within the party.

Our hard work and treatment of everybody in the talks process as human beings, from secretaries to Secretaries of State, yielded dividends in the run-up to Good Friday. We were determined that women should be specifically mentioned in the document and managed successfully to lobby Mo Mowlam to this end.

So what did the Women’s Coalition contribute to the Agreement? I cannot claim that if the Coalition had never existed then the Agreement would not have happened. However, I certainly can claim that it would have been a *different* Agreement, one with omissions that we believe would have been significant.

- We called for the formation of a Civic Forum in which local communities and other interest groups could participate and share responsibility for the future of our society. We knew that reaching an Agreement was one thing – implementing it would be an entirely different challenge and would require

risks. It has always been civil society that took the first risks, with civic leaders crossing over into each other's communities long before the politicians did. Peace-building in its broadest sense in Northern Ireland preceded the ceasefires. The Civic Forum also stressed the link between community development and social inclusion. (The Forum is one of the things that the DUP is very keen to get rid off in any renegotiated agreement.)

- We secured the right to the full and equal participation of women. We know that the right does not necessarily mean a guarantee, but it's a starting point.
- The recognition of the positive role of integrated education and mixed housing in reconciliation.
- The Women's Coalition ensured that the Agreement acknowledge the hurt inflicted on all sides; we wrote the section on victims into the Agreement.

Much has been gained since 1998, particularly on the equality agenda. While some of that would have been implemented via Europe anyway, the context in which it can be implemented owes something to the Good Friday Agreement, particularly Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. Because of the Agreement and the subsequent Assembly we now have a Children's Commissioner, and we have a draft Bill of Rights, which we are pushing to include social and economic rights.

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The constitutional aspects of the Agreement may seem technical, but they are crucial in building allegiance to a peaceful society. Also, while the military war appears to be close to an end the sectarian war is most certainly not. Sectarianism is the product of the divisions that we were rooted in and we cannot simply wish these divisions away. The Agreement set up protection against discrimination and oppression: the Equality Commission, the Human Rights Commission, a reformed police service and criminal justice system. They amount to the most advanced system for the protection of rights in the world.

The Agreement is therefore a sophisticated and brilliant mechanism for: sorting out a centuries-old inter-communal dispute; overcoming the bitterness of 30 years of war; solving the conundrum of competing national identities on the same territory; and laying the basis for an equal, fair and diverse society.

So what has gone wrong? Reversion to sectarian politics, that's what. When in doubt, play the old tunes – that seems to be the motto of some of our theoretically pro-Agreement politicians. Sectarianism means seeing the world exclusively in terms of the interest of your 'own' side as against the other side. Housing is not seen as an issue about homelessness or housing need but about the proportions of Protestants and Catholics and about territory. A major health

debate in the Assembly on maternity services was turned into a sectarian territorial tug-of-war over hospitals. Ironically the 11-plus debate which still rages to some degree got over the sectarian divide only to get caught by the class war, as middle-class Protestant and Catholic grammar schools championed selection, which advantages a few to the cost of many of our young people.

The Women's Coalition believes that the price of the protection of your own interests is that the other side's are also protected, and the price of not being discriminated against is not discriminating. Based on this we believe that we are witnessing not simply a failure of political leadership but that some politicians are now indulging in actively sectarian political leadership.

We have seen the results in our streets, with violence resurfacing at interfaces, refugee movements reminiscent of the 70s and an upsurge in sectarian hatred. We have seen pro-Agreement politicians abandoning the broad view and calling the odds on who threw the first stone like veteran street fighters.

Republicans have a tendency to present the Agreement as a simple, tactical stepping stone on the road to a United Ireland. In identifying the particular interests of one community with the march of history, Republicans are taking a sectarian position. More important, Republicans say to their constituency: you can have it all, you can have a reformed and equal Northern Ireland state and meanwhile we will keep in being the most sophisticated urban guerrilla army of modern times. That is prejudice – ignoring and belittling the interests and feelings of the other side – and a massive exercise of power. To maintain the IRA in being while participating in the institutions of the Agreement is sectarianism.

Unionists tend to present the entire progress of the Agreement as one of compromise and surrender by the Protestant community. To try and impose 'British' symbols on the police, to put a sectarian spin on police appointments, are attempts to maintain an identification of the police service with one community. That too is sectarianism. And on the one hand the DUP self-righteously condemn 'all' violence while on the other proclaim that Protestants are under attack and must fight back. That is sectarianism. The sectarian war has for too long been built on both the violence of the tongue and the violence of the gun.

These two positions have clashed head on. Bullied and chivvied by the extremists in the DUP and within their own party, the UUP offered no sense of permanency to the institutions of government. By maintaining the IRA as a force with military and subversive capability Republicans have demonstrated their own lack of faith in those institutions. The results of the last Assembly election saw more polarised voting and a large percentage of people not voting at all. Nevertheless, the Good Friday Agreement is still on the table, if battered and bruised. As signatories to it we are still committed to seeing full implementation. Although we are no longer in the chamber we believe we still have a valuable contribution to make and will continue to use our voice at every opportunity.

There then followed a question and answer session. In these sessions contributions from the floor are preceded by the symbol (•); invited speakers by their initials.

- I have been involved in cross-community schemes where people were able to get on together as friends. Yet once they return to their own areas it's not easy to maintain contact with the other side, and all the hopes disappear again.

[FC] I think there's less hope than there was even four or five years ago. Housing has become more polarised in Nationalist and Loyalist areas. There is a lot of cross-community work going on, some of it involving ex-prisoners, both Loyalist and Republican. But the reality is that many young people in the North still grow up without knowing anyone from the other community. They go to Catholic or state schools, they go to church-orientated youth organisations, and even statutory youth organisations tend to be located in one area or the other, because it's not safe for kids to move about freely.

- The whole point of the 'peace process' was to ease relations between the two communities, and yet they seem so much more polarised.

[FC] Interface areas still suffer from huge economic and social deprivation. Some of these areas also saw the greatest concentration of violence and death. Young people growing up in those areas are still largely going to segregated schools, and there's probably second, even third generation unemployment in their families. The demise of traditional work opportunities has really impacted on Protestant working-class communities, for Protestant kids don't have a culture of relying on education, whereas the Catholic community, who always felt they weren't going to get jobs anyway, focused on education. And the politicians aren't giving proper leadership. Take even their election campaigning. For the SDLP it's a case of: 'Stop the DUP –vote SDLP.' For

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the DUP it's: 'Vote for us and prevent Sinn Féin getting the biggest mandate.' They're not actually saying, 'Vote for us because this is what we're going to do,' they're saying, 'Vote for us so that the other side doesn't get in, or doesn't do as well.' This lack of political leadership, in my view, gives the green light for sectarianism to continue, because if the politicians won't even talk to each other why should we expect our young people to?

- But people get the politicians they elect. You described the Agreement as an anti-sectarian Agreement: is there not at least an argument that it was actually a *pro*-sectarian Agreement, in that it consolidated sectarian blocks in the Assembly? And that actually passed a message right through society that it's not a common society with a shared future: it's two different societies. It might be Unionist, Nationalist and 'other', but this 'other' doesn't get a proper look in.

[FC] The alternative was some sort of majority rule, and there was a real

concern about going back to a form of the old Stormont. I accept it was a risk. The whole arrangement was angled on the need to gain cross-party support if you wanted a motion passed, so that parties would actually have to do business together. Now, obviously you will get some bills on which there'll be general consensus. But over other issues you have to work cross-party. Take, for example, the Fermanagh versus Omagh issue in terms of hospital closure. I worked in Fermanagh at the time and I was amazed the way it impacted locally. Local Fermanagh politicians weren't able to take a 'party line', because their party colleagues in Omagh wanted the exact opposite of what they wanted! So politicians had to do business with other parties in order to represent their own area. That to me was real politics – forcing politicians to represent people locally. Now, the Assembly didn't exist for long enough to see how the need to gain cross-party support would operate. Nevertheless, while it was operating *all* of the ministers who held portfolios – from the DUP right through to Sinn Féin – did good work. But now, we've not even got direct rule: we're run by civil servants. And that's such a shame, because there's so many issues that local representatives need to be confronting – water rates, equality legislation, the bill of rights, the 11-plus – but they have no say in the matter unless they come back into government and start to take their own decisions.

- In relation to the DUP's current proposals regarding ministerial accountability –this concern they have about ministers doing their own thing, even if the rest of the Assembly are against it – in your view is this simply an attempt to bring back majority rule or is there a genuine problem here?

[FC] I think the DUP proposals were interesting, I think that what they reveal most is that there's a deep lack of trust. The DUP cite Bairbre de Brun's decision on maternity hospitals and Martin McGuinness's decision on the 11-plus as vindicating their position that ministers went against what people saw as best advice. I know they're talking about bringing in 'petitions of concern', but the danger of that is that such mechanisms could really slow up the process of democracy. I think there *is* scope for more accountability in the Assembly, but I'm not convinced that the DUP's proposals are the best way to achieve it. You can't have a minister bringing every micro-decision to the Assembly for approval, it would take forever. Democracy is not served well when nothing gets done.

- In the Republic there would be discussion around an issue within the cabinet and they would all then back their minister on whatever was agreed, But even that doesn't seem to be possible in the Assembly, for when people aren't even talking to each other how are you going to build trust to even do that?

[FC] The problem would be that if everything had to be agreed at cabinet level then you would, in effect, be creating an inner chamber for decision-making. And I think in that situation there'd be a real danger that the Assembly itself would become sidelined.

- I am an Ulster Unionist, who voted in favour of the Good Friday Agreement and would still vote in favour of it. But I think we've touched on one key word: 'trust'. The Good Friday Agreement relied on an element of trust and I think that trust was betrayed. David Trimble, when he entered into the Assembly, said that he was 'jumping' and hoped others would follow. The problem is that certain others did not follow, certainly not sufficiently, on the question of disarmament. And then when the Assembly was suspended this whole business of 'trust' was the element that the anti-Agreement people were able to build their case on. And, because the situation was further polarised at the last election, at the moment I don't see a way through this problem of mistrust.

[FC] Sinn Féin haven't helped matter in terms of the 'Stormont-gate affair', Castlereagh, etc... Then you have the State bugging Sinn Féin offices and party personnel, which is absolutely outrageous. And you're right about the whole issue about trust. I thought Trimble took some really brave steps and I really think the IRA have to deliver. Not necessarily decommissioning, for that is a complete red herring –no matter what they would decommission they'd be asked for more. No, I think they need to make another statement, saying that the war is over, that there is no reason for an IRA to exist because they believe that the political route is the only valid route. I know that there's a danger for Sinn Féin; that if they say the war is over, the disaffected within the Republican community will just move to the dissident Republicans and Sinn Féin will lose its hold on their constituency. But it can't go on like this. Nor can the knee-capping which is still taking place in both Republican and Loyalist communities. We're not going to get trust next week, or the week after, but if we can stage-manage a situation where the Assembly can get up and running and decisions can be made, then alliances can be built in the way they happen around local councils. And hopefully trust will gradually begin to grow. Trust happens when people get to know others personally. And, again, the segregated education system... the fact that people don't meet across the 'divide': you're in a circle where your viewpoint is just being constantly reinforced by your peer group. I mean, I had no understanding of the Loyalist/Unionist community until I was twenty; and I went through five years of college and still had little understanding. It wasn't until I worked in Lisburn with mainly Loyalist women that I actually sat down and began to hear their experiences and their perceptions. We need more opportunities for that type of engagement. It's happening to some degree in the community and voluntary sector – and through events like this –but there needs to be far more of it. Otherwise you will have no reason to ever change or challenge your own position.

We need more opportunities for [people to engage with one another]. It's happening to some degree in the community and voluntary sector – and through events like this – but there needs to be far more of it.

- Can I make two points. In the present situation, time is our enemy, because we're creating a vacuum, and the nature of a vacuum is that it is going to be filled in one way or another, and unfortunately that might include the wrong way. Secondly, you cannot make peace talking to friends. You can only make peace by talking to those who are perceived to be your enemy. I wish the politicians – on all sides in the North of Ireland – would be big enough to put the needs of the people before their need to be re-elected, and take that chance.

There now followed the first of the panel presentations

Julitta Clancy

(Meath Peace Group and the Guild of Uriel; given an honorary MBE in 2004)

I'm speaking today not as a political activist or a politician but as a member of two unique and highly dedicated voluntary groups in Meath and Louth.

I'm mindful that the last time I addressed a public meeting in Drogheda was on 16 August 1998, the day following the Omagh atrocity when 29 people and two unborn children were killed; and only three months after the signing and ratification of the Good Friday Agreement by the people North and South. Now the question put to us today was: 'The Good Friday Agreement: where to now?' However, given the realities of the present situation, I believe another question must also be addressed: 'The New Beginning: where has it gone?' For the Good Friday Agreement was supposed to be 'a truly historic opportunity for a new beginning', a fresh start in which the governments and political parties, North and South, firmly dedicated themselves to 'the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust, the protection and vindication of the human rights of all, partnership, equality and mutual respect, as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South and between these islands.' And in which, while acknowledging the continuing and equally legitimate political aspirations, they nevertheless committed themselves to 'strive in every practical way towards reconciliation and rapprochement within the framework of democratic and agreed arrangements.' The promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, the fostering of 'mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities, parity of esteem, and the building of mutual understanding and respect within and between communities and traditions, in Northern Ireland and between North and South'.

And it is with these fine words, and in the spirit of concord, that the parties and the two governments committed and commended the Agreement to the people North and South in May 1998, and it was this spirit that I believe motivated many people to put their trust in that Agreement and take a risk for peace. Many came from communities who had been alienated and disenfranchised

for years, many had been deeply hurt in the conflict of the previous thirty years. Many who voted for it were sceptical but were persuaded to give it a try, and there were many who voted for it whose experiences and upbringing would have steered them away from embracing the incredible compromises involved, and from ratifying such a complex and at times deeply flawed and ambiguous document. But those who voted for it, especially in Northern Ireland, from all communities, must have recognised that the achievement of the ideals set out in the Agreement would involve long-term work and commitment at all levels of society, if the crippling legacy of the past was finally to be laid to rest and a brighter future handed to their children.

So where are we today? Where are we now in that great journey, which we all embarked on with such hope six years ago? Great improvements have been made in recent years: most importantly a huge reduction in violence; the growing, albeit tentative, improvement in relations between some of the political groupings; the increased awareness of human rights and the equality dimension; the growing recognition of the need to understand and address the legacies of the conflict as a necessary part of building for the future; the healthier relations between North and South, particularly at official level; the reforms in political justice and policing and the greater sense of confidence among at least that part of the community which heretofore had felt severely alienated.

But we also have to acknowledge the numerous problems which still remain, the difficulties in the political process that have bedevilled and delayed the full implementation of the core elements of the Agreement, and also the wider societal problems that feed into and are aggravated by this continued political stalemate. And we have ample evidence of these: the bitter inter-communal disputes that have risen to the surface over the last few years, the sectarian and racist attacks, the increased interface tensions, the continuing paramilitary presence and activities, the intimidation of communities and individuals, the increasingly segregated housing arrangements, the disillusionment within many working-class communities, the growing alienation from the Agreement from within the Unionist community (only slightly over half of whom actually voted for the Agreement – and I don't think we ever really took that on board). And through all this, the lingering legacies of the conflict, the unresolved questions of truth and justice and the continuing pain of the victims of violence.

The imbalanced implementation, the cherry-picking, the foot-dragging practised by some parties, the failure of the power-sharing executive to endure, the low priority given to promoting and sustaining the reconciliation and healing process which, after all, were the core elements – the very spirit – of that Agreement, and the failure to make a real difference to the everyday lives of people in disadvantaged communities, has put severe strains on the peacebuilding process.

So, in relation to Northern Ireland, the answer to the question: 'The Good Friday Agreement: where to now?' depends very much on what happens in the current political negotiations; and, if and when the institutions are restored and

sustained, how the politicians and the power-sharing Executive can finally begin to address the glaring needs of that society and contribute to the realisation of the key principles of the Agreement.

But what about those of us in the Republic? The Good Friday Agreement set out challenges for us also, and the full realisation of the principles and the vision enshrined in that agreement depend on how they are progressed in *both* parts of this island. We're often accused, sometimes justifiably, of having done little to help resolve the conflict of the past thirty years; we have often been accused of turning our backs over the past eighty years and avoiding real engagement. But in May 1998 an historic opportunity was given to us to play a positive and constructive part in healing the divisions and the wounds of history. Yes, we voted to amend our constitution, but what else effectively have we done since then? We have not suffered in this part of the island in any way like our neighbours in the North; we have not had the problems of a deeply-divided society which they have had to live with. Therefore, we should have

What have we done to help build better relations between ordinary people North and South and within Northern Ireland; what have we done to build genuine understanding, mutual respect and tolerance, as promised in that Agreement?

been freer to develop new initiatives to better educate ourselves, to open our minds and our hearts; to facilitate, encourage and engage in the difficult dialogue and self-examination required. We expect the people in Northern Ireland to deliver and to compromise in ways we ourselves could not, we pressurise them to go the extra mile and when they fail we throw up our hands in despair.

Have we in the South grasped the opportunity given to us by the Agreement? Have we contributed to its aims and the spirit? Have we worked effectively to ratify and affirm that new beginning? How much are we still a part of the problem? What have we done to help build better relations between ordinary people North and South and within Northern Ireland, between people from both sides of the historic divide; what have we done to build genuine understanding, mutual respect and tolerance, as promised in that Agreement? What have we done to educate and empower our young people, to find ways to help heal the wounds, and positively contribute to a better future?

What are we doing to ensure that our own society is an inclusive one, one that values and respects its minorities? The building of a just, peaceful, tolerant, fair, inclusive, caring, respectful and enriching society should be the aim of all of us, especially those who would call themselves Republican, and I come from a strong Republican tradition myself. We must continually work to reform and improve our society, for our own benefit, as well as for the benefit of our existing minorities and the new communities coming to live and work here.

I will finish on one final aspect. The Agreement makes provision for a border

poll, whereby a United Ireland could be brought about by a majority vote in Northern Ireland. The achievement of a United Ireland is a legitimate aspiration that is acknowledged in the Good Friday Agreement. If brought about peacefully and with consent it would be welcomed by many people on this island; it would also be greeted with great fear by others. One of the things we said at the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation ten years ago was: *do not* rush this peace process, we need time to heal, we need to move slowly. Given the tragic suffering of the past, given the historic divisions on this island, we must be open also to other ideas and arrangements that might not necessarily reflect traditional thinking as to what would be involved in a United Ireland. So for those who genuinely long for a United Ireland I would urge you not to put undue pressure on a still-fragile peace process, nor hamper the healing and trust-building process, but to work for your aspirations in a truly peaceful, positive and non-threatening and inclusive manner. Above all, I would urge you to work to ensure that this Republic is a warm place, a place where all the children of the nation are cherished equally, where the symbolism of the Tricolour –green, white and orange –is truly and genuinely realised. The test of a true Republic is how it treats its minorities. There is much work to be done here. Thank you.

Nelson McCausland MLA

(DUP Assembly member, and a spokesperson for the Ulster-Scots language)

My view is that the Belfast Agreement is a failed agreement. There's some people who try to live in a state of denial about that, but I think it's absolutely clear – it is a failed agreement. It had cross-community support at the time of the referendum – just. The evidence shows that up until the last week the majority of Unionists would have voted against the Agreement in the referendum. There was a huge campaign set in train by the government in those last few days to sway it: we had Tony Blair coming over and writing in very large writing on the side of a wall certain pledges and commitments. Those sort of things swayed opinion and the outcome was that, within the Unionist community in Northern Ireland, there was a small majority in favour of the Agreement.

But, the thing has since collapsed. It collapsed because the Assembly collapsed again and again, even though all sorts of silly things were done to try and keep it alive. You had parties 'redesignating' themselves, ceasing to be what they were and becoming something else for the sake of a vote, just to get the right result. But in the end the Assembly collapsed – because the Agreement itself was fundamentally flawed. I think it's important that we address the flaws and try to find out *why* it went wrong, and that whatever is put in place now does not have those flaws built into it.

Of course, the other major problem was not just in terms of the actual Agreement but the context generally. We had 'Stormont-gate', we had the other

misdemeanours by the IRA, and all those things resulted in us being in the situation we are in today, where now *most* Unionists are opposed to the old Belfast Agreement. That has been clearly demonstrated in two elections. The Assembly election last year showed clearly that the majority of Unionists now support anti-Agreement candidates, in particular the Democratic Unionist Party. We saw that again in the European election. Most unionists are now staunchly opposed to what was in place before. Many of those who voted for it realised that the promises which Tony Blair made were not delivered on, that he misled them. There's a deep sense of alienation and resentment within the Unionist community, and that anger and resentment has increased in recent years.

We need to see changes if we're going to move forward into a peaceful future –and we should all be hoping for and working toward a peaceful future. But,

Most unionists are now staunchly opposed to [the Agreement]. Many of those who voted for it realised that the promises which Tony Blair made were not delivered on, that he misled them.

how do we go about it? Well, the first thing is that there has to be closure as regards violence, and if I make particular reference to IRA violence at this point it is simply because that is the organisation that is linked to a party very strongly represented in the Assembly. But my views about violence are quite impartial across the board: violence is wrong; terrorism, racketeering, these things are wrong. The IRA has to be off the scene; you cannot

have a party in government that is still, as Tony Blair said, 'inextricably linked' to the IRA. It also means that the weapons which have been used for so long as a bartering counter must be disposed of.

There has to be an end to violence on the streets, an end to the sort of intimidation that has been ongoing for far too long. In my own constituency there's a very small community called Torrens. It used to have several hundred Protestant homes, living in a small area surrounded by the Roman Catholic community. That small Unionist community – of about 150-200 families at one time – had lived in those houses for 30, 40, sometimes 60 years. Today, those families have largely gone. A few weeks ago the last thirty moved out. That's the result of sectarian violence, harassment, intimidation that was carried out and organised by the IRA. And it was painful to talk to those people. There was a man and his wife and two small children. They used to live in Fermanagh, on the border, but because he had served in the British Army he was put out of his home by the IRA. He came to Belfast and settled in Torrens, and now he's been put out of that home as well. A family with a little boy who is disabled – and their vehicle and home were attacked night after night by sectarian thugs. The area has been 'ethnically cleansed'. Why do I dwell on that? Because it's important that Unionists are convinced that all those different forms of violence have stopped. How can you have a government which includes people from

Sinn Féin, whilst all that is going on? We need to have Sinn Féin move away from terrorism, from its paramilitary connections, into becoming a genuine political party.

In regard to the Agreement itself: why are we [DUP] negotiating so strongly to get changes? Well, the Belfast Agreement was cobbled together very quickly in the end, decisions were made at the very last minute. I remember somebody once rang me up and asked: ‘Do you think we should have a cross-border language body? We need an answer in the next hour.’ Now, that’s not the way that you do negotiations. The thing wasn’t thought through properly.

We need to create a fair deal for everybody in the internal arrangements for government. The DUP put forward proposals as to how you can have genuine government that’s not only effective, but accountable: the sort of government that would have the support of people in both communities. You did not have it with the system that was in existence before. What you had was basically a series of independent, personal fiefdoms, where a minister could do what he or she wanted, and ignore the other members of the Assembly. Bairbre de Brun could say: ‘Future of the maternity hospital in Belfast? I’ll put it in my constituency.’ On the very last day, before the collapse of the Assembly, Martin McGuinness goes in and makes major decisions about the future of education, with no agreement from the Assembly. That’s crazy government. That’s bad government. We need to create accountable government that would be effective and efficient.

There also needs to be *proper* co-operation with the Republic of Ireland. It makes good sense to be a good neighbour; nobody could argue with that. There are lots of areas where co-operation can make practical sense and have mutual benefit. Waterways and rivers do not suddenly stop at a border; it makes sense to have an organisation that looks at waterways on the basis

of Northern Ireland *and* the Republic. We have no difficulty about that, we want to be good neighbours, we want a partnership. But if there is to be co-operation, whatever arrangements are put in place also have to be accountable and well thought out.

Take the cross-border language body – some of the things I heard about it baffled me. You talk to people in there and they’re trying to work out whether they are employed under the terms and conditions that pertain in Northern Ireland or those in the Republic. What happens if the holidays are bigger in the Republic, but the wages are bigger the other way? The amount of time that was spent trying to sort out some of these things...! It was all just cobbled together to get something quickly up and running.

Having got the issues of violence and the political arrangements sorted out, we need to look at issues of equality, human rights, where everybody has a fair deal. The ‘cold house’ situation of the Unionists needs to be addressed.

Then, the East-West aspect of the Belfast Agreement: the totality of relationships between the islands, the Council of the Isles... that was totally undeveloped and needs to be built up, because harmonisation of Northern Ireland and the Republic has the danger of making Northern Ireland different from the rest of the United Kingdom. I'm in favour of harmonisation if it brings all the regions of the British Isles into harmony with each other –but why should Northern Ireland be made to be different from the rest of the United Kingdom?

The Republic of Ireland too has got issues to address. There is a national minority in the South. There are people here, particularly in the border counties, who see their identity as sort of Ulster-British, Ulster-Scots. However they define their identity, there is a community there that needs to be considered.

Finally, my vision for the future is one where, having addressed these issues and having got the issues of violence and the political arrangements sorted out, we need to look at issues of equality, human rights, where *everybody* has a fair deal. The 'cold house' situation of the Unionists needs to be addressed. At the moment, for every £7 spent on Irish culture in a cross-border body, there's £1 given to my culture, and that's not equality, that's discrimination and disadvantage. If these things are sorted out I believe we can get a good agreement that can last and will produce a good future for everyone. Thank you.

Danny Morrison

(Former Publicity Director of Sinn Féin, Republican ex-prisoner, writer)

I want to go somewhat into the history of the Belfast Agreement: why it was signed, and why it is so important that the provisions behind it are defended. I grew up in West Belfast and felt alienated from the state, as were my parents and grandparents. Even though our community represented only a third of the people, we represented 60% of those who emigrated. Most of the key industries were located east of the Bann, in areas which had Unionist majorities. When the state was set up there was supposed to be safeguards to protect us, like proportional representation, but that was one of the first things the Unionist government did away with. Then they manipulated the councils, carved up constituencies and gerrymandered areas in such a way that towns with Nationalist majorities returned a Unionist majority at council level, who could then further discriminate against the Nationalist people. And we felt isolated. And from where I lived on the Falls Road, looking towards East Belfast we could see two things. We could see Stormont Parliament on the hill, which our elected representatives had tried to go into and make changes but were laughed at. In the entire 50 years of Unionist rule, Nationalists were only able to influence one single piece of legislation – an act for the protection of wild birds. They had no say on housing, education, or employment. The other thing that we could see from the dole office on the Falls Road was the twin Goliath cranes in the shipyard, where

again the history was one of Nationalist unemployment, with the small number who worked there being put out at gunpoint during pogroms, or tossed into the river Lagan where some of them drowned. So we had a lot of fears.

I've been to jail a number of times for being a member of the Republican movement, for which I make no apology; I am proud of resisting British rule in the North of Ireland. When I came out of jail I decided not to go back to activism, although I remain a Sinn Féin supporter, but to take up a writing career. I was fortunate to be up at Stormont on Holy Thursday and Good Friday when the Belfast Agreement was signed. People say the negotiations were rushed, but the ceasefire was called in 1994, and if they were rushed it was because Unionists made repeated demands that Sinn Féin had to go through a period of 'decontamination', and there were all these hoops that Sinn Féin had to jump through. And as each and every one was conceded we could never get anywhere, there was still always a problem.

We were told that Articles 2 and 3 were the problem. So this country, and Sinn Féin, voted to amend Articles 2 and 3. Then we were told that the lack of local representation was the problem, so Sinn Féin agreed to go into a hated Northern Assembly at Stormont –one

that historically had discriminated against our people –to share power, as a gesture toward Unionists. We were told that recognising Unionist Britishness was a problem, and that was accommodated also. Then we were told that the IRA was a problem. Now, if the IRA was going to return to armed struggle it has a funny way of going about it. Because three times it has allowed General John De Chastelain's International Decommissioning Body to examine major IRA arms dumps, and has put large tranches of weapons beyond use. It has been on a lengthy ceasefire and it is quite obvious that the armed struggle is over. And yet it still wasn't good enough. We were told that prison releases offended people, that it caused a lot of anguish to Unionists to see republicans, IRA people, being released early from jail. Our community never experienced that anguish because the people in the RUC and British Army who assassinated our people never went to jail in the first place. To this day we cannot find out the truth about the dirty war, about the collusion that went on. And Unionists, elected representatives, were the cheerleaders of this dirty war. There are major double standards. When David Trimble went into the talks he was flanked on his left and on his right by the political representatives of the UVF and the UDA. He spoke to [LVF leader] Billy Wright in Portadown, at a time when he refused to speak to the local people –and he was their MP –over an Orange parade trying to march down the Garvaghy Road. We saw him doing the famous

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jig with Paisley when they did get marching down Garvaghy Road. So we've had humiliation after humiliation piled upon us.

And the reason why republicans were able to begin an armed struggle in 1970/1 was because in 1968/69 when we went out and demanded 'one man one vote', the right to housing, the right to jobs –and we weren't calling for a United Ireland – the response of the state and the RUC was to bludgeon people to the ground, and it was RUC guns in 1969 which led Loyalists onto the Falls Road, when eight people were shot dead, and thousands of people were put out of their homes. So everybody has got a story to tell about communities being displaced, about pogroms, about people being killed. It isn't just one side – no-one has a monopoly on suffering.

The importance of the Belfast Agreement is that it was a compromise. And I pay tribute to the Ulster Unionists for taking the lead and going in at a time before the IRA had fully retired from the scene. And had they stuck with it I think they could have claimed that feather in their cap, which the DUP now, after Leeds Castle, looks like squandering.

Republicans want to resolve this issue, they want to share power on an equal basis with their Unionist brothers and sisters in the North, but there are major obstacles being put up against that. For the first time we've now cut to the chase. We were told that it was the IRA which was the stumbling block; but the two governments were satisfied last week that what is on offer is an end to the IRA. And what did we find? *More* demands have now appeared. That the way the offices of First and Deputy First Minister are elected has to be changed. That the powers given to the cross-border bodies have to be curbed. That ministers too have to be controlled by a new mechanism. (The number '30' has been mentioned in the *Irish Times* as being the figure the DUP are suggesting, and this just happens also to be the number of DUP MLAs – in order to emasculate the workings of the Agreement.) And what we suspect is that they are not and have never been interested in sharing power, and in equality – and that is the heart of the matter. But it ain't going to happen.

As Irish Nationalists in the North we cannot look to the British government to ensure full implementation of the Agreement. For example, even though they promised an independent public inquiry over Pat Finucane's murder, what we're getting is a truncated inquiry, many parts of which will only be held in private for reasons of 'national security'. We Nationalists require the Dublin government to defend the Belfast Agreement. The reason why cross-border bodies are important to us is this: the Unionists have got their Union, they can look towards Britain, but we as Irish Nationalists, particularly as people who have been repressed in our own country, want to be able to look toward an all-Ireland ethos. And we need those bodies to demonstrate to people in the South, and to the Unionists, that the workings of these bodies makes social, economic and political sense. So these democratic structures have to be defended. The DUP now have a big choice before them: if they want to force Direct Rule, go

ahead. We never wanted the Assembly in the first place, but we agreed to it in order to create a mechanism and a platform where both of us could learn to live with each other, talk with each other, hear each other's side of the story. If they don't want that and it goes back to Direct Rule they needn't think that Nationalists and Republicans are going to sit on their hands. We're still going to fight for and demand basic rights and principles: equality, justice, our right to express our aspirations with or without the Belfast Agreement. It's their choice.

Senator Mary O'Rourke

(Leader of the Irish Senate and long-standing Fianna Fáil minister)

It is good to hear different points of view put forward here with great conviction and sincerity. I have been in public life, at a local and a national level, for 22 years, and I have always had a huge interest in what we call the 'Northern question'. Now, whether you call this agreement the 'Good Friday Agreement' or the 'Belfast Agreement', it is clear that people had to compromise: they had to give in on certain aspects of what they might well have felt, and continue still to feel, was dear to them. But in the interests of bringing stability and a normal way of life, they were prepared to take that step forward.

I was interested to hear the views expressed on the North-South bodies, because I was a cabinet minister when they were set up. I participated in the ministerial get-togethers and found them extremely useful. It makes good economic and social sense for the people on one small island to work together on aspects of life which bring mutual benefits. I always think a wonderful example of such co-operation – long before this Agreement – was when CIE and their Northern counterparts got together to ensure that there was, as there had been in the past, an all-Ireland railroad. And they got together during very difficult times in the North, even when the trains couldn't run, and they decided that a joint enterprise – hence the name of the train, the 'Enterprise' – made economic sense.

Likewise with the North-South bodies; and the ministerial comings together which we had regarding them have been very useful and productive. For example, Sir Reg Empey phoned up, then appeared at my department door; he came in and we did the business. We were able to make very strong North-South electricity and gas agreements, and we laid the foundation for what I think will be of very great advantage to the island as a whole. Now don't tell me that wasn't just plain, good business. He didn't talk politics, I didn't talk politics; we did the business together and we were able to establish a rapport. Of course, I've always had good relationships with whatever administration was in Northern Ireland. I have been a very frequent visitor to the North, and likewise I always welcomed my counterparts back here – so that we could talk business. I think there's great scope for very huge economic development for this one island.

My colleague and friend, senator Mark Mansergh, who is on the next panel,

wrote an interesting article the week before the Leeds Castle talks, in which he said: the wonder of it all was that they *were* gathering. After all that had happened, and the change in representation which the elections brought – and we must respect the votes of the people who gave those mandates – and despite the pretty long stalemate which had developed, they still gathered at Leeds Castle. And that observation was so accurate: the wonder of it all was that they *were* gathering and that they *were prepared* to do so.

At a workshop recently I expressed the opinion that what might happen at Leeds Castle would be that there could be a sort of a courtship, but not yet an engagement – in the marriage sense. I think that is what happened. Any fusion between two sets of people, between parties, is very hard work, but I think the doggedness of purpose which is needed is there in abundance. And I took something very interesting from the papers two weeks ago, and I want to read it: ‘I believe that a golden opportunity has been available to realise a stable and entirely peaceful future, and I told the Prime Minister that in some respects we have never been closer to solving the problems that have plagued us for decades.’

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Now, who said that? Ian Paisley. And wasn't it a fine statement, in fact I would call it a noble statement. If the doggedness of purpose is kept, and the politicians – and the civil service who serve them – work doggedly, we can reach further along the road of progress. There isn't going to be a bolt of lightning overnight and everybody jumps out of their beds saying, ‘Hurrah, everything is settled’ – not at all. I mean, even listen to all of us here

today: some doubtful, some harsh, some questioning the length of time. But history doesn't move quickly, and peace, as has already been said, comes dropping slow. Apart from times of great battles, history moves in an evolutionary process and by so doing it brings the people with them. And that is what this process is doing. And really if I had one thing to say, it would be to say to people: keep your hearts open and alive to what can be for the people of the country. I think there is still a great vision and passion and altruism among politicians – and I know people are critical of them – but in general I believe they care about people.

I want to end with a few lines of poetry by Robert Frost: ‘The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep... and miles to go before I sleep.’ And there *are* miles to go, but they're worth going, and they're worth going if we keep our ideals and our passion and the good of the people in mind. Thank you.

There was insufficient time at this stage for a question and answer session; that was left until after the final panel presentations.

Dr. Sean Farren MLA

(SDLP Assembly member; former Minister in the NI Executive)

In just under three weeks from now we will mark the second anniversary of the suspension of the institutions set up under the Good Friday Agreement – the fourth such suspension. All of those suspensions were caused, not by the failure of the mechanisms of the institutions, or by bad relationships within the Executive, but by a failure to deliver on one of the key expectations of the Good Friday Agreement – mainly the completion of the decommissioning process, which in the Good Friday Agreement was to have taken place within two years of the Agreement being signed. Now we may say that there were different understandings as to what that section of the Agreement meant. But, at least from the expectation of my Unionist colleagues in the Executive, it was very clear to them that decommissioning had to proceed and had to be completed. You also need to remember the mindset of the Unionists who signed the Good Friday Agreement: David Trimble was the leader of a divided party, and the leading politician of a very divided community. In the previous thirty years Republicans had been responsible for almost 60% of all deaths, many of them members of the Unionist community – policemen, former policemen, UDR men, former UDR men, and business people who happened to have some tenuous association with the security forces. The clear expectation for Unionists was that that siege would be lifted, and I think it's not an unreasonable expectation for them to have brought to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. And it was only under the pressure that they exercised in the two years in which the institutions functioned that any degree of movement was made towards decommissioning.

Republicans had been responsible for almost 60% of all deaths, many of them members of the Unionist community.... The clear expectation for Unionists was that that siege would be lifted.

Now, I'm a Nationalist, I might even describe myself as a Republican, and I know that those who call themselves exclusively Republicans had different expectations. But none the less, this was an agreement signed by the Ulster Unionist Party, Sinn Féin, the SDLP, and others, including the Women's Coalition. And no agreement will work unless at least some of the expectations that all sides bring to it are going to be honoured, because if they're not honoured, then those who feel that they are disadvantaged by them not being honoured are going to take steps to ensure that they *are* honoured. To bring us right up to date, you could represent the news that was coming out of Leeds Castle last week – with respect to decommissioning –as Republicans at last agreeing to

complete what the Good Friday Agreement said had to be completed, but completing it in order that the DUP would be able to join the institutions. It's a curious irony that what the Pope on his knees here near Drogheda nearly 25 years ago asked Republicans to end and to abandon, and which successive Irish governments and other political leaders, and the Irish people in the referenda of 1998 endorsed, is now going to be accomplished because of what many people may describe as the intransigent position adopted by the DUP. Would that it had been done otherwise.

But if I can move now to another point. As I said at the outset, the Good Friday Agreement didn't fail because the mechanisms upon which the institutions operated failed. So if the conditions surrounding the Good Friday Agreement which would allow it operate are there, then there should be really no reason why the DUP should not come in and work with the rest of us to address any mechanisms which need improvement. I am prepared to accept that there is room for improvement, but not fundamental changes to the way the Good Friday Agreement operates. The Good Friday Agreement was a carefully crafted agreement, and I certainly don't accept what Nelson said earlier about it being rushed. I was there through all of the negotiations; two years we debated –up, down and sideways –and yes, we didn't come to an agreement until the end, but the architecture emerged slowly but surely throughout those negotiations. It's carefully crafted to provide safeguards to both communities in the North, and to ensure effective, upfront and transparent workings in terms of North–South relationships. And while – because of the suspensions – there's no long record of achievement, given the background from which we came, and the suspicions that we brought to our relationships with each other, none of could expect an immediate transformation of the economy or social life in Northern Ireland, or of North–South co-operation. But the beginnings were being laid, and the fundamental architecture of the Agreement can be built upon, bringing people within the North into a partnership arrangement with each other, and bringing the people of Northern Ireland and the South into new forms of partnership and co-operation. Partnership that respects the different identities, aspirations and affiliations of our people. And likewise on East–West relationships: there's a great deal that we can do to improve, develop and harness the potential that lies between this island and Britain, and all of the administrations that now exist within the UK. That architecture is very sound, and I believe it *will* persist.

Senator Martin Mansergh

(Member of Irish Senate and well-known newspaper columnist.)

There have been three stages of the peace process. The first was the seven or eight years leading up to the ceasefires, the second was from 1994-98 – the period leading up to the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement –and the

period since has been the implementation of that agreement. And of course implementation can be very difficult. If you look at other situations around the world –for example, the Oslo Accords or some of the agreements in the former Yugoslavia – implementation can be one of the most difficult stages in a process. For many years before 1994 the strategy was to build up a political centre as a solution to the problem, but even when the SDLP were the sole political representatives of the Nationalist community, the Ulster Unionists declined to do a deal with them, except in the brief period 1993/4.

I suppose the strategy of the peace process was to end violence by a politically inclusive process, and having included Sinn Féin it needs also to include the DUP. If the process has been difficult it's because politics now has to take virtually the full weight of inter-communal tensions, whereas previously some of the weight was carried by, unfortunately, the shootings and bombings. Ten years after the ceasefires, I think people want to see the peace process completed and moved beyond. I think there is a consensus, North and South, that paramilitarism cannot be part of the political equation. A decade is, by any standards, a generous transition period. I think the British and Irish governments believe, as Danny Morrison confirmed, that there is a readiness to wind up paramilitary activity in all its forms, in a political context where the institutions are restored and policing is devolved.

And there's also the possibility that paramilitarism could be wound up in the context of implementation of the Agreement, even if there isn't agreement

on the institutions, because the Agreement is much wider than the institutions. You cannot judge the Agreement purely by the institutions: a lot of reforms have been carried out – policing, release of prisoners, a commission on human rights and so on – a lot of work has been done.

A few other thoughts. Talk of 're-negotiation' rings warning bells with me. I think one needs to draw a distinction between re-negotiating forwards and re-negotiating backwards. In the legislation underpinning the Agreement there is perhaps some scope for making adjustments if there is agreement on new procedures. One can also overemphasise this question of mandate. The point was made to me that Sinn Féin won several 'mandates' for a united socialist republic. But this doesn't really mean that they're entitled to demand that the Agreement cease to be implemented until they get their united socialist republic. Parties have to interact with other parties, and you have to proceed from things that are properly ratified. On the question of accountability, Sean Farren made the point that the Agreement didn't fall down because of problems with the operation of the institutions. And as for the North-South institutions I did ask

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one DUP person at Leeds Castle about this question, but they couldn't give me a specific example of something on the North-South issue which was deeply objectionable or unsatisfactory to them.

There is a suggestion that the Assembly should have the power to overturn what the North-South Ministerial Council does. In theory, parliaments do have that right, but if parliaments overturn what the government is doing normally the government has to resign if it's a matter of any importance, so I would question whether one can really make that a principle of government. There is a need to accept that ministers in any system of government have a certain autonomy and discretion, and I think real power-sharing means accepting that ministers, Unionist and Nationalists, do have a certain measure of discretion. Of the two examples that were given of a decision unsatisfactory to Unionists, one was the abolition of the 11-plus, which is the one thing that distinguishes Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK. So, in a sense, Martin McGuinness was taking a decision which would bring Northern Ireland *into line* with the rest of the United Kingdom, and there was overwhelming professional advice in favour of that decision. I accept that the question of maternity hospitals had seemed to be on an objective basis, but it was a very evenly-divided case. And you would have many examples in every jurisdiction where things are absolutely even and maybe you do something that responds more to the needs of 'your' community, and, no doubt, Unionist ministers would operate that way as well.

The situation we're in now was accurately described by Peter Robinson of the DUP as 'extra time'. The British and Irish governments will have to decide, after a certain period, whether they 'call' it, but I think it would be much better if the parties would come to an agreement. I think it is also worth noting the huge commitment that both governments have given since 1998 to making this process work, despite all the other problems on their plate. Thank you.

Rev. Mervyn Gibson

(Presbyterian minister and Chair of the Loyalist Commission)

I'm a Presbyterian Minister and chair of the Loyalist Commission, which involves the leadership of the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Ulster Defence Association, and the Red Hand Commandos, the three main Loyalist paramilitary groups. We don't give political advice to them, that's the job of the Progressive Unionist Party and the Ulster Political Research Group. We were set up to help resolve some of the feuds within Loyalism and create space where conflict transformation could take place, and through the Commission I have engaged directly on behalf of the Loyalist paramilitaries with the Provisional IRA.

I'm an anti-Agreement person, but I want to set my opinions in a personal context, as other speakers have done. I'm the son of a Donegal man who moved to the North; the principles of the Irish Tricolour did not work for my father or

my grandfather. The same way that it doesn't work for border Protestants today, or for people in the North when the Dublin government sent people to take sides in the parades issue. The ideals of the Tricolour may be there but they're not lived out in reality.

Growing up in East Belfast, Stormont was as alien to me as it was to Danny Morrison. It was a 'big white house on the hill'; it had no relevance to me living in a working-class house with an outside toilet and all the rest of it. Where I lived, life wasn't great for those allegedly part of the Protestant Ascendancy. My father worked in a company at the bottom of the Falls Road and it was bombed out of existence, simply because it was Protestant-owned; he had no connection at that time with the security forces. So the Sinn Féin attacks are also sectarian and not purely to do with attacking the forces of the Crown.

Let's look at the Belfast Agreement. I think you oversimplify the issue if you say that objection to the Agreement came mainly from the DUP. There was a whole range of Unionism came out against it. I know people who would probably be Alliance supporters who voted against it, because they felt it was immoral to release prisoners before they had served their sentences. It was a tough decision for Unionists; and yes, many of us realised there would have to be compromises, that there were things in the Agreement we'd find hard to swallow. In the end, I decided in all conscience that I couldn't vote for it, for two real reasons. Firstly, the Agreement allowed the IRA into the very government of Northern Ireland – something the

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government in the Republic would not contemplate, yet we were expected to suffer it. And secondly, on a personal issue, I believed the RUC were going to be sacrificed – as indeed they were – for no other reason than to appease Nationalism and Republicanism.

What were the mistakes made after the Agreement? Well, I was a soft 'no', like so many other Unionists, so how could the government have persuaded me to give it a chance? Well, they didn't even try to persuade me, they demonised me; they said that because I voted 'no' I was anti-peace. I had served in the security forces all my life – trying to keep the peace – as did many other 'no' voters, but yet we were the ones who were demonised now as *anti-peace*, while the IRA and the Loyalist paramilitaries were now all suddenly *pro-peace*.

Sinn Féin's greed also, I believe, went against the success of the Agreement. I remember saying to a leading Provisional while in Boston in 1998: 'You have the Unionist community beat – the only thing that will beat you will be your own greed.' And that came about because of the endless concessions they demanded and were given by the government, who didn't try to appease or build any confidence within the Unionist community. Indeed there was no

investment of any kind within the Unionist community. The government had begun to engage with the IRA in the late 80s. They began to invest heavily in Nationalist communities by way of better housing, supporting community groups, and creating structures that allowed them to engage with the government. But that was never mirrored on the Unionist side; there was no effort, before or after the Agreement, to engage at all with grassroots Unionism, thus working-class, inner-city and rural Unionist communities did not mirror the development, investment and growing confidence that was happening in Nationalist/Republican communities. If those things had been addressed, I think we'd be in a different situation today with regard to possibly supporting the Agreement.

But where *are* we now? Well, I think we're about to start the real end game. I believe the Unionist people *want* an agreement, but one which takes proper cognisance of their fears. If this is the deal that is going to end it, then it's important not to hurry it. But there are things which will have to take place on the ground to bolster the Agreement. The discrimination and inequalities faced by Unionists and Protestants will have to stop. Young Protestant males from working-class areas cannot join the PSNI, they're discriminated against because of legislation. Des Brown, until recently a minister in the North, set up a community fund which was basically to address the imbalance in working-class Loyalist areas. But when it got down to DSD and other funding bodies, under equality legislation they couldn't allocate the funding along political or religious designations, and I can see why. However, there is no such conscience when so-called positive discrimination is enacted against Protestants. The funding had to go out to the most deprived areas, with the result that the Protestant community in Newry, for example, cannot access a community fund that was set up to bolster their community and develop its infrastructure. Instead, the money goes to the most deprived areas in Newry. Now, I'm not saying that the people there are not entitled to or don't deserve funding, but the fund was specifically set up to bolster the infrastructure within the Unionist community. But it's discrimination if you do that and only give money to Prods, yet it's not discrimination to say that a Roman Catholic has more entitlement than a Protestant to a job in the PSNI. There are inequalities that have to be addressed.

I was probably invited because of my connection with Loyalist paramilitaries, so I'd better give you something of their view before I close. Loyalist paramilitaries have a view that Blair will deal with Republicanism – by way of politics – and Hugh Orde will deal with Loyalism – by criminalising it and dealing with it by arrests and police action. There is a total lack of people now prepared to engage with Loyalist paramilitaries. Everybody loved them when they walked into the talks with David Trimble, and they're very popular come June every year when they assist to keep the peace during the summer months. But come August they become pariahs again; they're only used at times by government, and by some Unionist politicians. I believe that if the Loyalist paramilitaries were engaged and brought into a proper process – and they don't want a seat at the top table,

they realise they don't have the votes – they would respond adequately.

There has been talk about a new IRA statement. For me, and I believe the vast majority of Unionists, what that statement says will be all-important. Decommissioning is in the bag – that's a done deal – but if that statement doesn't say that the IRA will stop using physical force to try and coerce Unionists into a United Ireland, then I don't think there will be any end-game on. Someone once asked one of the Loyalist paramilitaries, 'What is it you want at the end of the day?' And he said, 'We simply want to remain British and live in peace.' That is, I believe, the response of the Loyalist and Unionist community to those who are trying to put us into a United Ireland. Thanks very much.

Michael Copeland MLA

(UUP Assembly member for East Belfast)

I've been an Orangeman for 32 years; I served as a commissioned officer in the UDR; I'm married to a former constable in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, who during her short service was shot once, blown up three times –all before she was 20. The only party in Ireland which I know had a definitive 'shot to kill' policy had its view expounded here today by Mr Morrison.

I know from personal and family experience that being poor and hungry on the Shankill Road was no more justified and no easier to endure than it was on the Falls Road. The high-minded ideals that bring about the birth of nations are worthless unless they make things better for people on the ground. We need to build a society in which politics has become relevant to people.

The Belfast Agreement was a compromise. No true Unionist would totally embrace the Belfast Agreement, but, at the same time, no true Republican could totally

embrace the Belfast Agreement: therein was the fudge and the compromise. We're a nation of 1.6 million. As a people we wrote, practically, the American Declaration of Independence; we signed, mostly, the American declaration of Independence, and we penned the constitution with others. Surely, it cannot be beyond that 1.6 million people to arrive at a set of terms under which we decide to live together, for the mutual benefit of *all* our children.

Nationalists and Republicans have jaundiced views of Orangemen, but they fail to realise that at the core of Orangeism is a belief in the extension of civil and religious liberty, not just to Orangemen, but to everyone. And if I as an Orangeman take for myself those civil and religious liberties, it is incumbent upon me to ensure that they are extended to all men. I am probably the epitome

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of everything Mr Morrison would like to see removed from the island of Ireland: an Orangeman, a commissioned officer in the Ulster Defence Regiment, married to a former constable in the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Nothing in *any* of those things should lead anyone in this room, or anywhere else, to conclude that they predispose me to a dislike or ill-feeling towards any other human beings because of their skin, their gender, their religion or their political profession.

If we squander this chance for peace, a real peace, history and our children will judge us very harshly. Politics is a difficult business, and sometimes it is hard to separate the personality from the party and to differentiate between the good of the party and the good of the country. I, like thousands of others celebrated –I would now admit foolishly – the fall of the power-sharing Executive [1974]; I don't know a single Unionist who would not take Sunningdale now, and hold onto it forever. Mr McCausland and his party will hear no criticism from me if they manage to make a deal fairer, but they must acknowledge that what they're doing now is taking place in the light, if not the shadow, of the original Agreement, and that we are on a series of stepping stones. The ills, real or imagined, that Mr Morrison and his Nationalist community felt, needed to be removed, but what has happened is that they have been placed instead on the Unionist and Loyalist communities. And if it was wrong for it to be done to his community, how can it be right for it to be done to my community? There are children in my community who this morning will have had no breakfast; there are teenagers who can barely read or write. And that offends me, it offends me deeply. It would offend me if they were Nationalist children, it offends me the same that they are Unionist. Something must be done to boost confidence and bring heart... yes, heart, back into a good people.

Tony Kennedy

(Chief Executive, Co-operation Ireland)

I will be speaking to you from what would be perceived as a 'community relations' background. For the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, things are better than they were when the ceasefire was announced ten years ago, better than they were when the Agreement was reached six years ago. There is more reconciliation taking place; but really there should be, because we're into the eighth year of a peace programme, funded overwhelmingly by the European Union, which is putting roughly 100 million Euro a year into here. There are, I think, over 140 different organisations involved in community relations activities, and I know that what we do *does* make a difference. But I also know that it takes place relatively small-scale and in an uncoordinated way. One person described community relations work as consisting of isolated, independent initiatives.

So if things are better, it's reasonable to ask whether they are better *enough*,

and the answer to that, I think, is ‘no’. I don’t think anyone expected this long after the Agreement to see headlines like the ones which appeared this week, revealing that the Housing Executive spent 10% of its budget dealing with families forced from their houses by sectarian intimidation. They go on to say that the real cost of this intimidation may be more than £45 million, as the costs only refer to people who own their own houses, and not to people intimidated from houses belonging to the Housing Executive. Last year there were 1245 people intimidated: about 45 of them intimidated because of their colour, and the rest intimidated because of their perceived religious beliefs. Or take another example. There are now 37 peace-walls in Belfast; there were 15 at the time of the first ceasefires. The only good news is that we’re seemingly getting better at building them! Duncan Morrow, of the Community Relations Council, recently mentioned that one of our walls –the one between the Springfield Road and the Shankill –is so good that it got an award in *Brick Monthly* as one of the nicest brick structures erected – so we’re getting really good at building these things!

Or, another example: near the Everton Complex on the Crumlin Road you will see two bus stops. Until about 18 months ago there was only one bus stop, but for operational reasons the bus company moved the stop 100 yards down the road. But, in doing so, they moved it from a perceived ‘neutral’ area into a perceived Catholic area and the local Protestants objected. The company reacted by keeping the new bus stop but reopening the old one! So now there are two bus stops 100 yards apart –one for Protestants and one for Catholics. And this is not an isolated example; but it is an example of a continuing division that is happening and is accelerating in our society.

I don’t take the soft view that the guns have gone silent forever. The guns have gone ‘silent forever’ several times previously, and I know that in Loyalist working-class areas of Belfast the UDA and the UVF are recruiting. I know that rejectionist Republicans are also recruiting, and that if we don’t take the chance to build a proper peace, in 10-15 years time there’ll be a whole new generation who will still have the old ideals of ‘isn’t violence a great thing’, and who will not know the horror of it. So I don’t actually believe we can sit back and say this will never ever happen again.

So what is needed? I think we need to somehow get our political representatives, specifically the two governments, to take these issues seriously. Martin Mansergh pointed out the inordinate amount of time which has been put in by the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister. But the work that has been done, has been to deal with this at a *political* level. What hasn’t happened is a serious, co-ordinated approach at a *community* level. I believe that a lot of the money given to us by Europe,

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frankly, has been wasted because it hasn't been used in a co-ordinated way. The governments should declare themselves committed to building a shared future for the people on the island – Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland – and set targets, just as they do with economic policy. When governments want the economy to prosper, they decide what their policy is, then engage in discussion with the major non-government players, trade unions and business organisations. They then set targets – for inflation, for unemployment, for a whole range of issues – and they force things through departments and make departments comply with economic policy. If governments took building a *shared* future as seriously as they take having a *prosperous* future they would set out their policies, they would engage in discussions with civil society and then they would set targets. So that a bus company would not be allowed to take what is the easy administrative option, but one which creates further division. And a Housing Executive would not take what is for them the easiest option – which is always to move the victims and give the intimidators what they want, making a more divided society. They would be forced to develop policies for a *shared* society. If targets were set they would start to be complied with. That is something all of us can ask people to do. I've listened to a number of speakers today explaining what the 'other' side could do in order to make life better for them; I think there's a responsibility on *all of us*, and all of us can do something to show that we are treating this as a serious issue. Thank you.

To complete this document, a flavour of the concluding question and answer session follows. (Not all the panellists had been able to remain to the end.)

- What do you think are the dangers in the current impasse?

[MC] The biggest threat to democracy, apart from Direct Rule, is the fact that an alarming number of people are now forming the view that politics is irrelevant to them, and if politicians become irrelevant to the people that will allow things to move back into the vacuum which will be created. I am also greatly concerned with what is happening within my own constituency in East Belfast – in terms of jobs and infrastructure. There were once almost 100,000 manufacturing jobs in East Belfast – the largest shipyard in the world, the oldest aircraft works, the largest rope works – yet these industries have largely gone, and our people have been left totally unprepared to cope. The people are electioned out, they're referendomed out: these things are an irrelevance to them. That's the truth, and we've got to make ourselves relevant again. I understand the difficulties that Mr McCausland's party has with aspects of the Agreement, and if they can change it, fair enough, but the dangers in failing are real and present.

[SF] I think that if we were to imagine a situation in which the Good Friday Agreement was declared null and void and dead, and start all over again, we'd end up with something very similar in terms of its key architectural features.

And, indeed, having been in close contact with DUP negotiators over the last few months and at Leeds Castle – and I hope I’m not misrepresenting what I heard – their focus is essentially on changing some of the mechanisms. The big issue is all but resolved, and by that I mean the decommissioning and ending of paramilitarism. But we don’t need a wholesale change of the Agreement.

- The fact that the DUP are still not talking to Sinn Féin and the problems we have with that – how can this be facilitated?

[NMCC] I suppose the issue there is the conditions that one sets for getting to the point of dialogue with Sinn Féin, in particular the setting aside of weapons and all those things. If those issues can be satisfactorily dealt with, that’s getting us in the right direction. There isn’t a clear decision yet as to what way that might or might not happen. It’s something that people [within the DUP] talk about obviously, because you have to look at all possible scenarios, but I don’t have an answer for you in that regard.

[SF] I think it’s worth remembering that the Good Friday Agreement itself was signed *without* direct negotiations between the UUP and Sinn Féin, and, indeed, any handshakes afterwards, so maybe we could resolve the present situation, however unfortunate it is. Any outside observer to the way in which our talks are structured would not be terribly impressed by the manner in which the whole thing is organised, I have serious reservations about the effectiveness of the way we go about things ... Castle-hopping, we’ve done the tour of big houses; I’m almost tired of seeing big houses.

I think it’s worth remembering that the Good Friday Agreement itself was signed without direct negotiations between the UUP and Sinn Fein, or any handshakes afterwards, so maybe we could resolve the present situation, however unfortunate it is.

[MC] As a person I would have difficulties in speaking with Sinn Féin, but I’m not simply a person, I’ve been elected to work for the people of my constituency, and if I thought that I could improve things for them I’d speak to the devil himself. However, I feel I should be able to expect some sort of assurance from Sinn Féin that they no longer consider myself, or my wife or my family, legitimate candidates for murder.

[TK] I think it’s worth pointing out, especially for people from the South, that there’s not a complete brick wall between the DUP and Sinn Féin. In the last elections the DUP dropped from its manifesto – I think I’m correct in this – its former bar against sharing platforms with Sinn Féin. Since then they have been on platforms with Sinn Féin: Nelson was here today, and so was Danny Morrison. So there may not be direct communications, but they’re certainly hearing each other’s views, and they are speaking to each other in local councils.

[JC] It's only when you get into talks that you realise and understand the 'other' side. I think the Republican movement originally saw the whole decommissioning issue as a red herring. The only reason they moved in the last few years is because through all their different contacts they slowly understood that, in fact, it *was* an important issue for the Unionist community, as a measure of trust. So in the case of the DUP also, I think they have a responsibility to talk as soon as possible with Sinn Féin, in order to represent *their own people* and present their own people's perspective.

[NMcC] Yes, I think one of the difficulties for all of us is that there is a lack of understanding about the 'other' community. And there is work being done to bring about understanding; such as the pamphlets Michael Hall has been producing – these have been very helpful in that regard. I sit in the same council chamber in Belfast with Sinn Féin, and sometimes when you're actually listening to people speaking you think to yourself: they just do not understand my community, or where I'm coming from. There are even simple, non-political misunderstandings. I was at a committee once and there was a discussion about arts grants and the point was made that some people within the Protestant community would not take lottery funding. And I could see across the table a member of Sinn Féin turning to the person beside him and looking bemused by this, as if wondering: 'What is that idiot talking about?' Then it was pointed out that some people in the Protestant community would regard the lottery as gambling, so there would be a problem for some churches taking lottery money. And then the issue dawned on the others present. Now, that's not a political point, but it's just an example showing that our two communities do have major differences. And, you're right, the more understanding there is between us the better.

- What can be done to build confidence?

[NMcC] Apart from workable structures, and the issues of decommissioning and weaponry and so on, there are issues there about building the confidence of the Unionist community, for there's a lot of distrust and frustration. Earlier Danny Morrison talked about the sense of Nationalist alienation. Well, we have now got to the point that there is a huge sense of Unionist alienation. Tony Kennedy was speaking about European funding. I'll give you an example... I was sitting on a panel in North Belfast for a programme of European funding – it wasn't peace money, it was for urban regeneration. And in a particular round of funding there were 22 applications, of which 20 were from the Nationalist community and only two were from the Unionist community. There is a huge investment needed over a long period, in infrastructure and development. We need to have processes, we need to have training schemes and so on, to develop skills, build up the confidence in that community. Partnerships only work when you have partnerships of roughly equals. Sinn Féin have achieved a lot of successes; we need to see some successes on the Unionist side, and that is a responsibility on us.

[SF] If I was on that panel the absence of applications from the Protestant community would worry me to the point where I would be asking: what are those people with responsibility for community development actually doing about developing the capacity in Protestant areas to *bring forward* projects? And maybe much more money needs to be directed at capacity-building.

- I'm now 31; I got involved in community development when I was 18, and one of the first documents I was handed was entitled 'Community Development in Protestant Areas' which detailed all these issues around capacity. Thirteen years later civil servants and others are *still* designing systems which take no account of these criticisms, which have been repeatedly put to them. They persist in creating systems which fail Protestant communities.

[SF] One of the reason why we need our own institutions back again is so that you'll have people like Nelson taking your case forward –or whoever is the MLA responsible for a particular Protestant area –and people like me taking forward the case for community groups in Nationalist areas, but knocking our heads together and making sure we are responsible *for both*, in ways that are more effective and more appropriate.

Sean Collins now closed the conference

Sean Collins

On behalf of my colleagues in Drogheda Cross-Border Focus, may I say a special thanks to all the speakers. I believe they showed great sincerity in what they had to say. I've come to know most of them over the last few years, and I regard them as friends. One of the reasons we asked them to speak at the conference was because we knew they weren't afraid to stand up and say what they had to say on behalf of their people and their tradition. I want to thank too the community people from Northern Ireland who came along. I've met a lot of them in Northern Ireland over the last few years, whether I was walking up the Glen with Danny Morrison or running round Ballymacarrett with George or Caroline Newell, or down in Ballybean with Billy Mack. And I learn a bit more every time I go up there, that's why I wanted them here today to be part of this. I must thank our Mayor, Gerald Nash, who has been a great supporter of this conference since we first put the idea to him; and all the councils from the different parts of the country who supported us. Paul Allen for last night and Parolen for providing additional sponsorship. I particularly want to thank my two colleagues, Ide and Paul, and our background team, Ronan and Pat. And, of course, all the staff here at the Europa Hotel – they were very helpful for the whole weekend. I think on that point we'll conclude, I wish you all safe home.

Thank you.