

Francis J. Duff Memorial Lecture

Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

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I am delighted to be here today to deliver the 1st Francis J.Duff Memorial Lecture. I also think that is very appropriate that I am delivering a lecture entitled "Healing the wounds of history" in this historic and battle-scarred building that played such a central role in the traumatic events of 1916.

Healing the wounds of history on this island has been the biggest challenge during my political lifetime. Frank Duff spent his life healing the wounds of thousands of individuals. As a surgeon he worked in Dublin hospitals, and St Vincent's in particular, to treat patients from all over the country. As an educator, he played a distinguished role in medical education in UCD. Above all through his work in the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, itself an old and distinguished institution, he made a great contribution to widening access to medical education both in this country and abroad. Thanks to his leadership of the College, it is now a major centre for the training of doctors from developing countries, putting Ireland on the map of international centres of excellence.

I am also pleased that members of Frank's family are here today, and especially Joan. Joan has also made her own contribution to education and culture on this island, and to a better understanding of our history, through her work with the Irish Museums Trust and the National Museum.

Joan has told me of Frank's commitment to treating the whole, the patient, not just the disease. He felt it was important to look at the big picture and to consider the human, emotional and psychological

condition of the patient. A patient was not, for Frank, simply a set of symptoms or a case but an entire human being.

A similar vision has dominated my view of politics. It is not enough to look at the symptoms, it is vital to analyse comprehensively the whole situation to see what gives rise to problems if they are ever to be resolved.

A superficial approach to the politics of our island has been to identify the fundamental issue as the territorial division of the island. Politics then revolves around the issue- either how to end the division, or how to maintain it. This lead us into a situation where the desire for territorial unity was acted upon by a minority in violent fashion, and where a majority of nationalists had no clear strategy to achieve their objective. Similarly, unionists could only uphold their position through repression and discrimination with no clear strategy for securing consent for their legitimate rights from the majority of citizens of this island.

As a result political life in Ireland was dominated for much of the twentieth century by the clash between irredentist nationalism and separatist unionism. Two territorial mindsets prevailed. On the nationalist side, it was assumed that because Ireland is an island, it should be one country. Supported by the assumption that because there was a nationalist majority on the island, the nationalist case should prevail, nationalists never recognised the unionist perspective.

Unionists adopted their own territorial mindset, best summed up as "what we have we hold". In this view, the unionist minority on the island was under siege and therefore the nationalist minority in Northern Ireland could only be regarded as the enemy, not as fellow citizens.

These mindsets lead us into the protracted conflict of the late 20th century - The Troubles. Together with the tendency of the British mindset to see the conflict as a simple law and order security problem, we were condemned to 25 years of violence and destruction.

To end the Troubles, it required us to look at the total picture and to underlying relations between communities and governments on these islands. In particular, we had to change the territorial mindset, and to look at the fundamental divisions on our island. That is what I, my colleagues in politics and many people in all walks of life have been doing for the last thirty years.

Essentially Ireland is divided because the people of Ireland are divided. The border is a line on the map, which would not exist if not for the powerful barriers running through the minds and hearts of the people of this island. The real task of politics is to change hearts and minds, not to redraw maps. That is why we need a healing process, one which addresses the underlying causes of division, not just the political symptoms.

Crucially this meant that the use of violence was not only totally wrong, it was also counter-productive politically. Not only could the

use of violence not advance the objectives of its practitioners and supporters, it could make a bad situation worse. Violence entrenches the divisions, breaks more hearts and simply engenders further violence.

In these circumstances only an inclusive agreement, arrived at through dialogue and mutual respect for everyone's rights, freely arrived at in a totally peaceful atmosphere, could begin to resolve the conflict.

I stated as far back as 1977 that only a real and dynamic partnership between all our people could solve our problems. I quote:

“The necessity of equality, the necessity of consent, can now be promoted only by a partnership between the two Irish traditions. The road towards that partnership will be long and hard...but there must be a beginning, a first step in what may well be a journey of a thousand leagues.”

When we began to put forward such ideas in the 1970s, many people on both sides of the divide were suspicious. For nationalists it was seen as a break with tradition while unionists suspected we were just putting new wine into old bottles. It has taken a great deal of time and effort to get to a position where, finally, the majority of people on the island endorsed our analysis by voting for the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

I would like to chart briefly some of the steps along the way.

The first indication that there was some hope of ending the conflict was when we negotiated the Sunningdale Agreement. If Sunningdale had worked, we would have saved a great many lives and avoided two decades of violence. But the failure of Sunningdale showed that we had in fact underestimated the degree of division between unionists and nationalists. The suspicion, hatred and prejudice were much more deeply rooted than we had predicted.

It then became unfortunately clear that resolving the conflict was going to be more difficult, and would involve a deeper transformation of mindsets than any simple political deal between governments and parties. Any Agreement would have to obtain the consent of our divided peoples.

The next major step was the New Ireland Forum of 1983 when parties from the nationalist tradition, North and South sat down to re-evaluate our assumptions, and try to reach a consensus on the way forward. The lasting result was that our formulation that any possible solution has to address the three major relationships underpinning the conflict; relations between unionists and nationalists in the North, between North and South, and between Ireland and Britain, was accepted by the vast majority of nationalists on this island.

The New Ireland Forum paved the way for the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. The Agreement was particularly important in dealing with the relationship between North and South, and between

Ireland and Britain. However, unionist rejection of the Agreement meant that we still had to work on making unionism part of the political process.

The Downing Street Declaration of 1993 was designed to bring everyone into the political process, including those previously excluded. Unionists were given guarantees while the Republican movement was offered the chance to give up violence and take part in mainstream politics.

Following the Declaration, the Republican and loyalist cease-fires of 1994 provided a new impetus to the search for an inclusive political settlement. As my party had consistently argued, only in the absence of violence would any political progress be possible. Eventually, we arrived at the Good Friday Agreement.

I am going to discuss the Agreement in more detail in a moment but I want to refer to two other important factors in arriving at the Agreement. The first is the great interest taken in the resolution of our conflict by the US.

The US has been engaged in promoting the cause of peace on our island since the late 1970s when Tip O'Neill, Hugh Carey, Daniel Moynihan and Edward Kennedy launched their initiative. President Jimmy Carter also took an active interest, and successive Presidents have followed his lead. However, with the election of President Clinton, a step change took place in terms of US influence, activity and support for the peace process.

Second, the existence of the European Union and the fact that both parts of the island are members of the EU has been very influential. The European Union is the best example in the history of the whole world of conflict resolution. Countries that slaughtered each other for centuries now share common institutions and policies. While the first half of the 20th century with its two world wars, and 50 million dead, was the bloodiest period in the history of Europe, the second half was a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity.

I never stop telling the story of when I first got elected to Strasbourg in 1979. I took a walk across the bridge from Strasbourg in France to Kehl in Germany stopped in the middle of the bridge and meditated. I thought: "Good Lord, if I had stood on this bridge 30 years ago, at the end of the worst half century in the history of the world with two World Wars and 50 million human beings dead and said - Don't worry, it's all over - those countries will all in a number of years time be united in an united Europe' - they would have sent me to a psychiatrist. But it happened. And it's something we should never forget.

If France, Germany and Britain as well as the other member states were able to put their differences aside, then it seemed feasible to resolve our conflict. In the darkest days of our conflict, the EU was a powerful inspiration, giving us the confidence that one day a peaceful Ireland would become possible. That indeed proved to be the case.

As well as being a source of inspiration, the EU has also contributed practically in direct and indirect ways. Through its regional,

agricultural and cohesion policies as well as the existence of the single market, it has helped both parts of Ireland to build up the economy, change attitudes and bring us closer together.

It also helped to promote better relations between Ireland and Britain. Irish and British ministers, officials and politicians work together on a wide variety of issues in a much wider context than the narrow ground of Northern Ireland. It has helped to place the relationship between Ireland and Britain on a stronger footing.

Within Northern Ireland, membership of the EU has, of necessity, obliged people to work together in promoting common interests within the EU. It is much effective when Northern Ireland speaks with one voice within the EU institutions. Making use of European Union programmes often means that communities have to work together across the divide. This is particularly the case with the Special Programme on Peace and Reconciliation.

It has also helped to promote better relations between North and South as people discover their common interests. As a peripheral island, both parts of Ireland often find that their interests are identical when EU policies are being formulated. This is most noticeable in the case of agriculture, but there are many other policy areas where we have common interests on this island.

I want to take a closer look at the EU because the principles behind the EU are the principles behind the Good Friday Agreement.

First, respect for difference. Differences are accidents of birth. Therefore it is not something we should fight about. There are not two people in this room who are the same. There are not two people in the whole world who are the same. Differences are inevitable. Differences are the essence of humanity. Therefore the answer to difference is to respect it and not fight about it. That is the first principle of the European Union.

Accepting that there is going to be differences is the basis for the second principle - the need for institutions that respect those differences. Therefore, all member states are represented in all the institutions, and at levels. Everyone has a member of the European Commission. Each member state sends ministers to the Council of Ministers. Everyone is represented in the European Parliament. No one is a permanent majority, nor in a permanent minority. The EU is an extremely complex set of institutions designed to ensure that everyone is treated fairly and where everyone's fundamental interests are protected and advanced.

Third, and most important, is the purpose of the institutions. They are not there just for their own sake, but to obtain specific objectives. The Treaty identifies the promotion of "economic and social progress for their peoples" as one of the principal aims of the member states. This is the most important principle behind the creation of lasting peace in Europe -

This is the principle which I call the healing process. The peoples of Europe through their institutions then worked together in their common interests and no longer waved flags at one another and

fought about them, but worked on real politics, the socio-economic development of Europe. In other words, they spilt their sweat together, not their blood. And as they did that together they broke down the barriers of centuries of distrust and hatred and division. The new Europe has evolved and is still evolving.

The relevance of these principles to the Good Friday Agreement is obvious, and we have begun a healing process in Ireland. This is not easy and there have been setbacks.

Principle number one, the respect for difference is the basis of the Agreement. It is not a victory for one side or another; it is a victory for us all. No one has to stop being a nationalist or a unionist, no one has to renounce their identity or aspirations. Everyone has to agree to pursue their goals by exclusively political and peaceful means.

Principle number two, the need for institutions that respect difference is at the heart of the Agreement. The Assembly is elected by proportional representation so that all significant sections of opinion are represented. The Executive is then chosen on the basis of the composition of that Executive, again ensuring that everyone is represented at the heart of the political system

Principle number three is that the institutions of the Agreement are there to work in the common interests of all the people. When the Agreement has been in full operation, remarkable progress has been made despite the many issues that divide the political parties. Programmes for Government have been agreed as have the even

more difficult problem of budgets. Some people seemed to be surprised by this, but I regarded as it an inevitable part of the healing process once political parties were given the responsibility for ensuring that the major economic and social needs of their supporters were fulfilled.

Leaving aside the major constitutional issues that have hindered the operation of the Agreement, there are many differences of opinion between the parties but that has not prevented widespread agreement on the practical business of what I describe as real politics - the promotion of the socio-economic agenda. To pursue wider and long-term objectives, people have to live. The right to live in peace, to a decent standard of living, to access to education, housing and health care are necessary for everyone, irrespective of their constitutional views. The political picture looks very different when you have to focus on the totality of society rather than on the political symptoms.

We cannot heal the wounds of centuries in a few years. The violence of recent decades in particular has left deep wounds. The hurts that have been inflicted and suffered do not go away just because the Agreement has been made. The Agreement cannot take away the pain, but it is the start of the healing process.

That is why it is so important that the Agreement is upheld and implemented. I hope that after the elections, we will be in a position to continue the healing process. Working together in our common interests is the best political medicine we can prescribe. As we do so, as the healing process evolves, as new generations emerge, we can

**look forward to the emergence of a new Ireland in a new Europe.
We do not know where the healing process will take us, and how fast
it will proceed, but we do know that it is the best possible way of
treating the wounds and divisions of centuries past**