

We stand, not for the perpetuation of hatred, but for the rooting up and elimination of old hatreds, old furies, and the quenching of old fires; we stand for peace and sanity and construction in this country, and peace between neighbours

So spoke Kevin O’Higgins during the Dáil debate on the outcome to the Boundary Commission in 1925. O’Higgins recognised that while the Irish struggle for independence that had climaxed four years earlier with the Anglo-Irish Treaty had brought independence to 26 counties it would be impossible to extend independence to embrace all 32 counties without “... the rooting up and elimination of old hatreds, old furies and the quenching of old fires...and peace between neighbours.”

Una O’Higgins O’Malley profoundly shared her father’s sentiments. Throughout her public life she strove with a single-minded and creative determination to meet the challenge of achieving the goals they imply for relationships between the two main political traditions on this island, unionism and nationalism.

Today the best prospects for meeting that challenge lie with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. And while the Agreement’s implementation has been uneven, problematic and crisis ridden it still offers the best possible basis on which to resolve the tensions that arise from the diversity of national allegiances, religious beliefs and political aspirations of the people of Northern Ireland and between the people of Ireland as a whole.

Fundamentally the Agreement commits its signatories to a process of democratic dialogue and partnership within a constitutional and political framework that respects the identities, aspirations and allegiances of all. The constitutional and institutional provisions together with what are termed ‘confidence building measures’, i.e. human rights, policing and judicial reform, prisoner releases, decommissioning of paramilitary arms, cultural rights etc., of the Agreement address all of the contentious issues that lay at the heart of the conflict. In doing so the Agreement is the most comprehensive ever between representatives of the Irish people and between Ireland and Britain.

Furthermore, voters North and South in Ireland endorsed it emphatic terms in the joint referenda of May 1998.

Kevin O’Higgins like his daughter would have been among those foremost in promoting the Agreement and in advocating its endorsement.

As to constitutional change paving the way towards unity, by asserting that democratic, peaceful persuasion is the only acceptable means of achieving that goal, the Agreement rejects the physical force approach long central to so many tragically futile campaigns to achieve that goal. Indeed, difficult as it was to do so in 1925, only four years after Ireland had been partitioned, O'Higgins and his colleagues had clearly accepted that Northern Ireland would retain its status within the UK unless and until a majority voted for change. Una voiced the same approach long before the agreement of 1998 was signed and vigorously opposed the campaign of violence which, lacking any political or moral legitimacy and with no hope of success, only continued to stoke "*old hatred .. (and).. old furies*".

Effectively the O'Higgins position and that of the Good Friday Agreement itself means that Irish unity has to be worked for and argued for in terms of what can be demonstrated to be in the best interests of all of the people of Ireland, 'Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter', and not merely in terms of what is *asserted* to be in their interest.

The Good Friday Agreement does not assume or even suggest that unionists are nationalists in waiting. Rather, it is a covenant of honour between nationalists and unionists whose principles and even some of whose structures would endure regardless of constitutional change because they are in the best interest of peace and stability. As such the agreement enables conflict to be replaced by a peaceful competition of ideas between unionism and nationalism while also requiring people of both traditions to work together to forge a better society for all.

That is what the partnership arrangements for governing Northern Ireland are intended to provide and also what the North-South, or all-island elements of the agreement are intended to create.

It is within the North that that engagement will be at its most intense because, of course, it is there that relationships between unionists and nationalists are most immediate and most painful. Despite an end to violent conflict the pain in those relationships persists. It is still deeply felt by those who were affected by loss, by injury, or by the destruction of their livelihood as a result of violence. The pain is to be seen in relationships between political parties, in the tensions surrounding parades and in attitudes towards the police.

But it persists also in the many, often unreported minor acts of sectarian motivated verbal and physical abuse perpetrated by one side on the other. Regrettably it manifests amongst young people for whom the years of violence are only known through the pages of history books, or the folklore of their communities.

In many areas, children from different schools in the same towns no longer share bus stops or school buses when travelling to and from their schools. School timetables are adjusted so that the exodus from one school does not converge with the exodus from another – all to reduce the ever present possibility of sectarian confrontation. Young people wearing the ‘wrong’ sporting colours run serious risks of being assaulted if they venture into the ‘wrong’ neighbourhood. Celebrating a team’s victory can provoke a riot if the venue is too near an interface area; buses carrying people to some event or other can be attacked simply by passing close to the ‘wrong’ ghetto; even centre city places of entertainment have become marked as ‘orange’ or ‘green’; investments and developments in one community are jealously compared to those in the ‘other’.

More significantly, consider the following contrast. Thanks to strong employment legislation people increasingly work in religiously more integrated work places. But at the same time people are increasingly residing in religiously segregated neighbourhoods. Such segregation leads, not surprisingly, to one-sided socialising, it reinforces school based segregation and produces a society in which the ‘other side’ still remains subject to very negative stereotyping. Past and present insults, injuries and pain are kept fresh as stereotypes are passed intact from one generation to the next.

Politically segregation reinforces solidarity around those parties that portray themselves strongest at standing up to those perceived as a threat on the ‘other’ side. In practice it leads to the harassment of minority group residents and frequently to their involuntary departure from neighbourhoods where they have lived for many years.

The outcome is the maintenance of suspicions and antagonisms that feed inter-communal tensions, hatred and conflict. This tension boils over during the marching season leaving society wondering how and when fundamental change for the better will ever be registered in community relationships.

Yet another paradox is that neither community in the North wants for initiatives aimed at bringing about that kind of change, initiatives of the kind that Una endorsed. A considerable amount of effort, commitment and organisation is invested in all kinds of

initiatives aimed at eliminating sectarianism and at developing a more respectful approach to community relations within the North and between North and South. And such initiatives have their successes. There is more awareness and more knowledge about and between communities and increasingly more being undertaken under cross-community and all-Ireland auspices.

Schools, youth organisations, women's groups, development groups, religious groups, arts groups, sporting groups etc. etc. are engaged in these initiatives. If it's difficult to measure the scale of their achievements, one has to wonder how much worse the situation could be if they didn't exist. Certainly the scale on which they exist and the scope of their work must rank amongst the most positive community based changes of the past twenty-five years.

Overcoming and eliminating such manifestations of sectarian divisions will take time but tackling them in a concerted way is an almost impossible task in the absence of shared political institutions. If political representatives cannot be seen to be working together but instead are seen as perpetually at loggerheads with each other, there are no shared examples of how positive relationships can be developed across the North's community divide. People may now enjoy the same rights but there is little or no sense of social cohesion or mutual responsibility.

On the all-Ireland stage the opportunities created by the GFA to forge economic, social and cultural links by the establishment of the North-South Ministerial Council have marked another sea change for the better. The work of such bodies as *Intertrade Ireland*, *Waterways Ireland*, *Tourism Ireland*, and the *Languages Body*, are evidence of the benefit to be gained by people and communities through co-operation on an all-Ireland basis.

The growth in North-South trade, the development of research to business links on an all-island basis, the development of a single island wide tourism market, are practical examples of the benefits that are already flowing from this approach. In all of this no one's political allegiance or aspirations are threatened.

So, how can change for the better be sustained so that the grosser problems which produce inter-communal tension and confrontation are eliminated? The short answer is political leadership committed to work the partnership institutions of the GFA, which demonstrates support for the reformed and transformed police service and for a human rights based approach to resolving disputes over parades and other contentious matters.

Such a partnership approach requires that each community accept the *bona fides* of the other's cultural identity, political aspirations and allegiances in the terms prescribed by the GFA. If people who describe themselves as republicans cannot respect the Orange tradition as legitimate and that it has a right to the lawful, public expression of its customs, then it is less than republican. If the Orange and other loyal organisations and unionist politicians cannot enter into dialogue and then into working partnerships with nationalists, or cannot respect nationalist traditions and, especially, the religious allegiance of most nationalists, they betray the civil and religious liberties that they claim to defend.

Failure will have its most serious consequences in the area of community relations. Failure will mean that at best a benign form of apartheid will exist here. At worst, the suspicions and hatreds underlying that apartheid will fester and smoulder risking future explosions of a greater or lesser sort.

Above all if the partnership approach cannot be entered into wholeheartedly at all levels of government, local as well as regional, then we condemn ourselves to another generation in which age old tensions will fester and, from time to time, overflow into violent confrontation.

If we fail to pursue the changes to our relationships essential to the full implementation of the GFA, we will have lost the best opportunity to make Ireland the beacon of hope which the world had expected of us on that Good Friday morning of 1998.

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