

International Perspectives on Reconciliation Conference
Organised by the Herbert & Valmae Freilich Foundation, Australian National University

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**Reconciling the Irreconcilable?
Lessons from the ‘Peace Process’ in Northern Ireland**

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Introduction

I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land and thanking Agnes Shea for her warm welcome this morning on behalf of the Nunuwall people. I would also like to thank the National Library of Australia and the Herbert and Valmae Freilich Foundation for organising the conference and providing a very important opportunity for us to reconsider the issue of reconciliation and learn from each other and the experiences gained by those working for reconciliation in a variety of different countries.

My talk is about the process of reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland itself is a small place both geographically and also in terms of population. While there are only around one and a half million people living in Northern Ireland there have been, over the last thirty years, over 3,600 people killed as part of the conflict and literally tens of thousands of people injured and/or traumatised. While there is a peace process currently in place and the main paramilitary organisations are on ceasefire, Northern Ireland is still living with and having to deal with the legacy of this conflict. The events reported around the world concerning the Holy Cross Girls’ Primary School in Belfast illustrate the deep mistrust and divisions that still exist. More generally, segregation is a part of life in the region. Around 75 per cent of people live in either Protestant or Catholic areas. The vast majority of schools – 98% - are also segregated, being either Protestant or Catholic.

There are also high levels of segregation in terms of the use of social and leisure facilities in Northern Ireland.

There are three things that I want to do in my talk today. First, I want to look briefly at how we got to this current situation in Northern Ireland. Second, and with that as a basis, I want to outline what ‘reconciliation’ has meant within the context of Northern Ireland. As I said, there has been a ‘peace process’ for the last eight years and so there’s much practical evidence to discuss in terms of how the more abstract notion of reconciliation has been translated in practice. Third, I want to conclude by offering some brief reflections on the situation in Northern Ireland and its relevance to reconciliation here in Australia.

Background to the Present Situation in Northern Ireland

The first thing I want to focus on, then, is the historical context of how we have got to the present situation in Northern Ireland. This is a difficult task given that there are over 800 years of history to cover. However, it is possible to give a brief overview of some of the key periods and developments in that history that have come to provide the context for the current situation. Until the twelfth century the island of Ireland was essentially split into a number of kingdoms ruled by different indigenous tribes who were, at times, in conflict with one another. The British first invaded Ireland in 1169. They were able to develop a powerbase around the area now known as Dublin and its surrounding lands, known then as ‘the Pale’. As an aside, it is interesting to know that the phrase ‘beyond the pale’ i.e. going too far or overstepping the bounds of decency relates back to this time. For the British at this time, Dublin and the Pale represented civilisation and all that was beyond the Pale was the uncivilised and violent indigenous people of Ireland.

Over the next few hundred years, the British attempted to gain control of the rest of Ireland. One enduring problem for the British was the northeast of Ireland - the province of Ulster – that had become a stronghold for the indigenous tribes that lived there. It was an area that was only finally overcome in 1609. In an attempt to secure their rule of the

island and especially their control over the north, the British adopted a plantationist strategy. This involved bringing in large numbers of English and Scottish settlers who took control of the land in the area and thus maintained stability and British rule in the region. The settlers were largely Protestant by background in comparison with the indigenous Irish people who by this time were largely Catholic. While the conflict was therefore one about territory and nationality, religion came to be a marker by which the two key sides were distinguished.

In 1801 the whole of Ireland merged, politically, with Britain by the Act of Union. Ireland at this point gained the same status as Scotland and Wales. Ireland had 105 constituencies that elected MPs to sit in the British parliament in London. From the mid-1850s onwards, there was strong lobbying particularly from the Irish MPs for home rule for Ireland. However, the notion of home rule tended to be resisted by sections on both sides. For many of the Protestants in Ulster, they saw it as a threat to their own existence and vehemently resisted it. This resistance led, in the early 1900s, to the establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force (the UVF) as a paramilitary force ready to defend their heritage should this be necessary. On the other side, some Catholics felt that home rule did not go far enough and still gave some credence to the British occupation of Ireland. For these, the only acceptable solution was to be a completely independent Ireland, free from British interference.

1916 saw what has been called the Easter Rising in Dublin. This was a very significant event. A large number of republicans took up arms and captured some of the major Government buildings in the city. The aim was to encourage insurrection across the whole of Ireland. Unfortunately for them, they were eventually violently quashed by the British and fifteen of the key leaders were executed. This caused strong resentment among many of the Irish people and in the following 1918 general election, of the 105 MPs returned to Parliament in London, 73 were members of Sinn Fein, a republican party that stood on a platform supporting those who led the Easter Rising.

The situation had now become untenable. With such levels of political resistance, Britain could no longer keep control of the whole of the island. Their 'solution' in 1921 was to partition Ireland – to give 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland independence and to keep the remaining six in the northeast under British rule. Because of the historical patterns of settlement, this was an area with large numbers of Protestants loyal to Britain. It was also the most industrially-developed region in Ireland. To secure Protestant control, the actual boundaries of what came to be known as Northern Ireland were drawn carefully to ensure as large a majority of Protestants as possible.

From 1921 until the late-1960s, Britain basically left Northern Ireland to its own devices. The unwritten convention in parliament, for example, was that Northern Irish matters were simply not discussed. During this time, local Protestant rule in Northern Ireland was seen as discriminatory against Catholics in terms of jobs, housing and also politically. Ward boundaries were purposely manipulated to return more Protestant councillors to local councils than Catholics, even in local areas where Catholics were the majority. By 1967 the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was formed as a non-violent, non-sectarian organisation committed to campaigning for social and political rights for Catholics. However, a number of their marches and rallies met with violent opposition leading, eventually, to widespread disorder and it was this that led to the British army being deployed on the streets of Northern Ireland initially to protect Catholics.

It was not long, however, before many Catholics came to view the British army as being there ultimately to shore up the existing system and thus to protect the power and privilege of the Protestant majority. In this sense the events surrounding Bloody Sunday in 1972, where 14 civilians were killed when British paratroopers opened fire on a civil rights march in Derry became a critical moment. It led some within the Catholic community to join the Irish Republican Army (the IRA) in order to defend, in their eyes, the Catholic community and to force the British out of Ireland. During the same time a number of loyalist paramilitary groups emerged, including the UVF and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) to defend the interests of the Protestant community that they saw as being increasingly undermined by political events around them. The violence that

ensued inevitably led to increasing levels of segregation as people were either forced to leave certain areas, sometimes being threatened and burnt out of their homes or fled to other areas that they felt were safe.

This, then, provided the main ingredients for the next 25 years of sectarian violence and tension. By the early 1990s it was becoming evident to most of those involved that a stalemate had been reached and that no side was going to win the 'war'. The British were never going to 'defeat' the IRA and the IRA, in turn, were never going to drive the British out. Exploratory talks began between John Hume, the leader of the non-violent constitutional political party the SDLP and Gerry Adams the leader of the Sinn Fein. This eventually led to the IRA declaring a ceasefire in 1994 followed by the main loyalist paramilitary groups. This, in turn, provided the basis upon which the different political parties and representatives of the main paramilitary groups were able to begin to engage in dialogue and it is this that has become known as the peace process. Discussions were aided and facilitated by Senator George Mitchell and they eventually led to a landmark agreement being reached on Friday 10 April 1998, widely referred to as the Good Friday Agreement. The proposals contained in the Agreement were the subject of referenda in Northern Ireland and also in the Republic of Ireland and gained strong support from the majority of people in both jurisdictions of Ireland.

Reconciliation in Northern Ireland

The Good Friday Agreement can be seen as the main driving force for reconciliation in relation to Northern Ireland. This leads me onto the second thing I want to do in my talk today and that is to outline in a little more detail what, precisely, reconciliation means within the context of Northern Ireland. There are three arenas within which reconciliation has been taking place – political, economic and social – and the Good Friday Agreement can be seen as comprising the political aspects of reconciliation. Politically, the Agreement addresses three key issues: internal relations within Northern Ireland; relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (north-south relations); and relations between Ireland, north and south, and Britain (east-west relations).

Regarding internal matters, the Agreement proposed a new devolved political system, centred around a 108 member Northern Ireland Assembly and 10 member Executive with each member of the Executive being a minister of a Government department. All of this reflected a careful attempt to facilitate ‘power-sharing’ between Catholics and Protestants. The Executive contained five nationalist (Catholic) members and five unionist (Protestant) members and was led by a First Minister (unionist) and Deputy First Minister (nationalist). Within the Assembly, the interests of both sides were safeguarded by the provision that key political decisions required the support of the majority of Protestant and Catholic members of the Assembly.

Alongside the Assembly, the second main development in relation to internal matters has been the focus on what has been termed the ‘equality agenda’. The legislation that followed the Agreement contained a requirement that all public authorities should promote equality of opportunity and also promote good relations with regard to a range of areas, including religion but also gender, disability, sexuality and ‘race’. In this regard, each public authority had to produce an equality scheme outlining how, precisely, they intend to fulfil their responsibilities under the new legislation. A new Equality Commission for Northern Ireland was established to oversee the equality agenda. Its role includes considering and approving each public authority’s equality scheme as well as promoting equal opportunities more generally. Finally, with regard to internal matters, the Agreement addressed the issue of the decommissioning of paramilitary groups and involved such groups, within the context of the Agreement as a whole, committing themselves to disarming completely over a period of time.

The second aspect of the Good Friday Agreement dealt with north-south relations and involved the establishment of Implementation Bodies that involved politicians from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland working together in six areas: inland waterways; food safety; trade and business development; special European Union programmes; language; and aquatic and marine matters. Further more, six additional areas were identified where greater cooperation should be developed between politicians

north and south: transport; agriculture; education; health; environment; and tourism. As also mentioned, the final aspect of the Agreement related to east-west relations and really comprised two aspects: the establishment of a British-Irish Council that included representatives from the north and south of Ireland and from Scotland, England and Wales; and also the establishment of a British-Irish Inter-Governmental Conference that provided the forum for meetings between Government ministers.

As I explained earlier, the Good Friday Agreement really represented the main way in which reconciliation has been addressed in the political arena. As you can see, it really represents a very carefully crafted political strategy aimed at accommodating the political interests, needs and aspirations of two deeply divided peoples. As a whole, the people of Northern Ireland have been given back political power to run their own affairs but with the necessary safeguards to protect the interests of the minority. Moreover, the political aspirations of the Catholic population for a united Ireland are accommodated with the development of greater links between the north and south while the interests of the Protestant population and their desire to remain part of Britain are maintained by the provisions for east-west relations. While the implementation of the Agreement has not been without its problems, the fact that it gained widespread support both north and south of the border certainly suggests that it can be regarded as a major political achievement in attempting to reconcile what appeared to be largely irreconcilable political differences.

These political developments have taken place alongside existing and ongoing attempts at reconciliation within the economic and social arenas. Economically, perhaps the most significant development was the establishment by the European Union of the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation for Northern Ireland and the border counties. This was originally established for the period 1995 to 1999 and provided substantial funding to help increase economic development and employment opportunities; promote urban and rural regeneration; develop cross-border cooperation; and also extend social inclusion. Funds were administered via a range of avenues including Government departments, intermin funding bodies and local partnership boards. The British Government also established a policy called 'Targeting Social Need'

that aimed to encourage departments to identify areas of social need within its own areas of responsibility and to ensure that existing policies and resources were used effectively to address these needs. All of these economic developments can be seen as attempts to address the legacy of a prolonged period of violent conflict while also providing the key foundations upon which peace and good relations can be developed and sustained in the longer term.

Finally, within the social arena, there have been attempts for many years to encourage greater contact and good relations between Catholics and Protestants in areas across Northern Ireland. Perhaps the most systematic and sustained attempt to do this can be found in relation to education and the programme known as Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) that was introduced as a cross-curricular theme in the Northern Ireland schools curriculum in the early 1990s. It set itself four key aims in relation to encouraging pupils to: firstly, respect and value themselves and each other; secondly, to appreciate interdependence of people within society; thirdly, to understand commonalities and differences between communities; and, finally, to appreciate how to handle conflict in non-violent ways.

Reflections on Reconciliation in Northern Ireland

As can be seen from this brief overview, reconciliation in relation to Northern Ireland is a complex and multi-faceted process working across political, economic and social arenas. Given the focus of this present conference, what I want to do finally is to consider a number of issues arising from attempts at reconciliation in Northern Ireland and to discuss their relevance to the issue of reconciliation here in Australia. I need to say, however, that I have been on a steep learning curve since I have been over here and there is still much that I need to find out about your situation. What I am going to say, therefore, is only tentative and please forgive me, in advance, if I demonstrate any ignorance!

In going through the history of the problems facing Northern Ireland and the way in which the notion of reconciliation has been played out in practice over the last decade, there are four points that stand out for me that seem to have some relevance to the situation here in Australia. The first is that reconciliation is a long-term process. As we have seen, the divisions that exist in Northern Ireland have evolved over centuries. As such, they cannot simply be turned around over night. There are deep-seated fears and resentments that need to be dealt with as well as extremely engrained social, economic and political divisions. The same is clearly true in relation to the current experiences and treatment of Indigenous Peoples here in Australia and the process of reconciliation that needs to take place. In terms of timescales, therefore, whether we are looking at Northern Ireland or Australia we are really talking in terms of generations rather than years.

The second point that stands out for me in terms of parallels between Northern Ireland and Australia is that there are fundamental political and legal matters to be resolved in both cases. As we have seen, in Northern Ireland there is the constitutional question or, in other words, how Northern Ireland relates to the Republic of Ireland and also Britain. Here in Australia there is the issue of a Treaty and what has been called the ‘unfinished business’. There is a need to redress the wrongs of the past and to establish a new agreement that can put right relations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the nation as a whole. I think that both of these issues – the constitutional question in Northern Ireland and the ‘unfinished business’ here – are easy to write off as unachievable. I certainly never thought that an agreement could be reached on the constitutional question in Northern Ireland that would gain the support of the majority of people on both sides. However I believe I have been proven wrong. There is still a long way to go and still many obstacles to overcome. However, the Good Friday Agreement certainly provides the foundations upon which this issue can eventually be settled. I think the lesson from Northern Ireland for here is that those things that may seem impossible are not. In our case it may have taken a very long time and involved much conflict and antagonism but there is now real possibilities for change opening up. I certainly hope that this can provide encouragement for those of you here who are lobbying for movement on the issue of a Treaty.

Thirdly, it is also clear that the divisions that exist in Northern Ireland and here in Australia have a structural basis. We have already seen in the case of Northern Ireland that it is a deeply segregated society. Ever since the establishment of the state in 1921 there have been problems with inequality and discrimination across all aspects of life. This is why what I referred to earlier as the 'equality agenda' plays such a central part in the process of reconciliation in the region. The structures that have arisen are by no means perfect but they do represent a pretty stringent system of monitoring public and private bodies and holding them accountable. In a similar way here in Australia there is what some people have referred to as 'practical reconciliation' – the need to tackle the inequalities faced by Indigenous People and to redress the injustices of the past. Tied into this is the notion of the 'Reconciliation Test', of ensuring that Australian governments are rigorously monitored and that transparent benchmarks are set for their programmes with the aim of addressing existing disadvantage. As I have heard said a few times now since I have been here, many politicians and government officials are good at 'talking the talk' – there is the need now to ensure that they 'walk the walk'.

Finally, there are many social issues that need to be addressed in relation to reconciliation, both in the context of Northern Ireland and also here in Australia. In this sense there are at least two levels that need to be addressed. At one level there exists in both situations a great deal of misunderstanding and mistrust that, in turn, continue to breed resentment and fear on all sides. There is a need for effective educational programmes and efforts within communities to increase understanding and respect for one another and to build meaningful relationships. This, in turn, means being proactive and dealing with some hard issues. To be honest, while the need for this has been recognised within Northern Ireland through the Education for Mutual Understanding programmes in schools as I mentioned earlier, we are still a long way off making sufficient headway in this regard. However, for reconciliation to be effective then these are fundamental issues that need to be addressed.

On another level there is the need to deal with the pain of the past. In Northern Ireland, as I have mentioned, there have been over 3,600 deaths related directly to the conflict and tens of thousands of people injured and traumatised. Questions remain unanswered in relation to many of these incidents and events in terms of who was to blame and accusations of state collusion. In a similar vein, there are equally disturbing issues that need to be addressed in relation to the experiences and treatment of Indigenous People here in Australia including the 'lost generations' and deaths in custody. The notion of reconciliation is based upon a vision for the future where previously divided peoples can live and work together in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect. However such a vision is built upon trust and requires that all sides deal effectively with their pasts. While these are all incredibly difficult issues to resolve, they cannot just be swept under the carpet and ignored.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that when I was first asked to come and give this talk I was concerned that the divisions between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and the situation here in terms of the position of Indigenous People were so different that there would be little that I could say on the subject. Moreover, in looking at some of the other speakers here today and the topics they were invited to talk on, I really did feel that my contribution would be limited. However, preparing for this talk has been an invaluable exercise for me. It has helped me to think through, in a practical sense, what reconciliation means in practice and the issues and dilemmas that are faced along the way. Moreover, in comparing the two very different situations of reconciliation in Northern Ireland and reconciliation here in Australia I have been struck by the similarities. Yes, they are two very different situations. However, the processes of reconciliation that need to be built do seem to require the same foundations. As we have seen, they are processes that require time, that need to deal with fundamental political and legal matters, that have to address structural divisions and inequalities and that, also, need to address the deeply engrained levels of fear and mistrust that exist and deal with the pain of the past.

I have certainly learnt a lot about our own problems in Northern Ireland by having the opportunity to listen and learn about the problems you face here. I think conferences such as this one play an invaluable role in helping us to realise that we are not 'on our own' and that the problems we face may be different but they are far from unique.