

John McCallister MLA's Speech

Shared Future: building and sustaining peace, the Northern Ireland case study

Europe's past

It was the then British Prime Minister who, in 1938, infamously referred to the growing crisis in central Europe as “a quarrel in a faraway country between a people of whom we know nothing”.

I am sure that across the decades, many in Europe have thought in a similar way about Northern Ireland and Ireland.

And yet, our conflicts on this island have been very similar to conflicts elsewhere in Europe.....

The conflicts between nationalities and allegiances; the threat posed by ideologies committed to violence and terror; the burden of divisive pasts.

And on this island, in both jurisdictions, we have shared fundamental European values – values that triumphed in western Europe in 1945 and across the entire continent in 1989.

It is these European values which underpinned the 1998 Belfast Agreement, bringing an end to conflict and holding out the hope of reconciliation.

And what of the burden of the past?

Europe is hardly a stranger to this.

Europe knows, after the divisions, bloodshed and totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century ...

That protecting, nurturing and cherishing our shared values continually requires us to examine our Continent's past.

If we do not want our shared values to be undermined by violent and divisive ideologies ...

We need the citizens of tomorrow to know what such ideologies have done in our past.

We need tomorrow's citizens to own an account of their past which promotes the values of freedom and democracy ...

To have a narrative of our past which demonstrates the roots of our shared values today.

The past, in other words, has profound relevance for the politics of today and tomorrow.

History and the Irish experience

On the island of Ireland we have had to wrestle with our own pasts – divisive, painful and bloody pasts.

As a citizen and a politician in a society emerging from conflict, I am convinced that history cannot be left entirely to the professional historians.

When history is shut up in academic institutions, enclosed in a debate which occurs only between academics, the result is not a society which forgets about the past.

Rather, the result is often the perpetuation of triumphalist, sectarian and divisive myths about the past by the political extremes.

In both parts of the island of Ireland, we have been well-served in recent years by our historians puncturing and deflating the false myths central to divisive and sectarian interpretations of our history.

It is, however, an open question as to what extent our mainstream political representatives and opinion formers have robustly committed themselves to ensuring that public discourse reflects and builds on the work of our historians.

The result of this has been the continuation of interpretations of our past shaped by values hostile to the building of a peaceful, shared society.

Tomorrow's extremists in Northern Ireland and Ireland, therefore, are being shaped today by sectarian and triumphalist interpretations of history.

Tomorrow's democratic citizens, in Northern Ireland and Ireland, need to be given a progressive narrative of our pasts – in which the myths which glorify violence and sectarianism are challenged and exposed.

I think if we are honest in both parts of this island, we know we have much work to do.

A new public history

This is not to say that there have not been notable successes in shaping a new public history which promotes progressive values.

The history of the 1916 Battle of the Somme is perhaps the most striking example of this.

Throughout most of the 20th century, the Battle of the Somme was interpreted by Northern Ireland's unionists as the ultimate vindication of their political stance and by nationalists as an alien event, having nothing to do with nationalist Ireland.

In recent decades, this divisive interpretation of a key event in our past has been entirely overturned.

Through the work of academic and amateur historians, community leaders and political representatives from both jurisdictions, we now see the Battle of the Somme as part of a shared past ...

A shared past in which Irish people, both unionist and nationalist, participated in the Great War of 1914-18 – shared past, shared sacrifices, and (to some extent) shared values.

As we therefore approach the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, it provides an opportunity in Northern Ireland and in Ireland to challenge those who use divisive interpretations of the past to divide our societies today and to encourage violence and extremism.

Centenaries and Shared values

Two other defining centenaries are occurring for Northern Ireland and Ireland. This year marks the centenary of the 1912 Ulster Covenant, the founding charter of unionism.

In four years' time, there will also be the centenary of the 1916 Declaration of the Republic, a document fundamental to modern Irish nationalism.

It is easy to see how both centenaries could be used to promote sectarian and divisive views of our past.

This is what makes it vital for political and civic leaders in both jurisdictions to actively engage in promoting another view of both events, both documents.

The Ulster Covenant is no charter for unionist triumphalism and exclusivism. It is a profoundly liberal document, defined by its support for civil and religious liberty, and for equal citizenship.

Also noteworthy is the fact that it was signed by over a quarter of a million women, at a time when women were still denied the right to vote.

The 1916 Declaration of the Republic is very far from being a justification for terrorism ...

It commits Irish nationalists and republicans to the noble aim of "cherishing all the children of the nation equally".

As a proud and committed Northern Irish unionist, I know that my political tradition has at times fallen short of the values proclaimed in the Covenant.

I also know that it is these values which must shape my political tradition going forward and which have much to offer 21st century Northern Ireland.

And I look to the nationalist and republic political tradition to likewise embrace the 1916 Declaration with the same self-critical spirit, willing to use its values to challenge those who have used the Declaration to support violence and intolerance.

Two founding documents of two political traditions – but a sense of shared values to build a shared future.

That is why political and civic leaders have to be involved in the history business.

If we are not, be assured that others will be – promoting their divisive views of the past in order to promote a divided, violent future.

Addressing the Recent Past

I have talked of centenaries.

But what of the more recent past?

Between 1969 and 1998 over 3,500 people were killed as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

The years of conflict in Northern Ireland continue to cast a shadow over our politics and our society.

And as a society, we have not been able to agree on a way in which to address our recent past.

Without devaluing the vital work that has been done to promote a shared understanding of the events of 1912-1916.

It is true at least to some extent that such good work is undermined if we cannot similarly address the events of 1969-1998.

Perhaps I can give a personal reflection.

I was asked to speak in my capacity as a unionist political representative to teenagers from a school in the Republic of Ireland.

In discussion of the conflict in Northern Ireland, I was shocked at the extent to which those who had no personal memory of the conflict, - and who were born in a part of Ireland generally untouched by it- had views on the nature of the conflict that were – to say the least – profoundly troublesome.

They had a view of our recent past which undermined peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

I don't think those teenagers are to blame for their views.

I do think that the failure of political representatives in Northern Ireland and Ireland to address the recent past is creating a dangerous vacuum.

Into this vacuum step those whose interpretation of the events of 1969-1998 glorifies violence, terror and intolerance.

For all of us on this island committed to peace and reconciliation, and to democratic values, this is not a sustainable state of affairs.

The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, David Cameron, showed great leadership on this matter in his response to the inquiry into the events in Londonderry in January 1972.

He recognised wrong-doing by the forces of the state and apologised.

Such courage has not been displayed by other participants in the conflict.

Other participants have displayed a willingness to celebrate in a triumphalist fashion, events and personalities which undermine reconciliation and a shared future.

It is not going to be easy or free of political risk ...

But we in Northern Ireland and in Ireland, across our political traditions, have to confront our recent past ...

And promote an understanding of 1969-1998 which aids rather than undermines peace and reconciliation.

I realise that for the republican tradition in particular, this poses significant challenges.

A failure of political courage at this point, however, threatens the likelihood of a genuinely shared future for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Shared past, shared future

“A quarrel in a faraway country between a people of whom we know nothing”.

It was not true of Europe in 1938 – it is not true of Europe today.

The peoples of Ireland, and then of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, were involved in the upheavals, conflicts and triumphs which Europe experienced in the 20th century.

Our experiences and our conflicts were typically European – disputes over nationality, allegiance, and identity.

Like many other parts of Europe, we experienced communal conflict and violent terror ...

We shared fundamental European values which allowed parliamentary government to take deep root in both parts of this island ...

Values which have enabled our societies to begin to emerge from the shadow of terror, hatred and division.

I do not think we can offer a blue print for conflict resolution or for dealing with the past ...

Indeed, as I have said, our process of reconciliation is still very much a work in progress.

I do, however, hope that I have left you with the conviction that for a society to emerge from conflict and to build a shared future ...

The past must be addressed.

Those who want tomorrow to be defined by violence, division and intolerance are promoting their narratives of the past.

We who want tomorrow to be shaped by democratic values, by peace, by reconciliation, have a responsibility to build a shared future by promoting a shared understanding of the past.

It is my hope that this conference encourages all of us across Europe in this undertaking.

Thank you.