

OSCE Chairmanship Conference – “Shared Future: building and sustaining peace”

The Northern Ireland case study

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Speech by First Minister Peter Robinson

[Source DUP website]

As First Minister of Northern Ireland and someone who has been involved in politics for over 40 years I am pleased to be able to share my perspective on the issue of conflict resolution.

For most of the last half century Northern Ireland has been a society in conflict, divided by identity and ravaged by terrorism. Over three thousand people lost their lives and tens of thousands were injured. There was a legacy of economic devastation and social division.

But today Northern Ireland is a society transformed with all the major traditions represented in our Government and the rights of all of our people guaranteed. Despite the economic downturn we are beginning to put Northern Ireland back on the map economically.

In recent months the deputy First Minister and I have been on numerous trips to attract foreign direct investment and have welcomed senior representative of the Chinese Government to Northern Ireland. The symbolism of our united approach to bringing prosperity and investment to Northern Ireland is the clearest evidence that the peace which has been achieved is here to stay.

There are still a few who would seek to take us back to the era of conflict and division, but ironically their efforts only serve to unite rather than divide us today. We have come too far to allow us to be diverted from our task.

In the years to come we will continue to build the peace and to ensure that the conflict will never return. Times have changed. Whereas once politicians sought to gain power by pledging to oppose other parties, last year both the DUP and Sinn Fein increased their mandates by promising to work together for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland.

We may not share the same long term constitutional aspirations but we have learned that we must work together to address the everyday issues that face our people now.

Making peace in Northern Ireland is an all too rare example of what can be achieved. There are few places in the world that have so many people with so much experience. Nowhere is the proverb, “success has many fathers, failure is an orphan” more true than in Northern Ireland.

Our expertise stems not just from our success, but from every failure that went before it. There are no short cuts or easy answers. There is no one size fits all solution. Making peace is difficult. Reaching agreement with historic enemies is hard. Persuading your own people that it is the right thing to do is harder still. Problems that are decades or hundreds of years in the making cannot be settled overnight.

Today, our peace process is hailed as a success, but it did not always seem like that. There was an awful lot of process before there was very much peace. In the time available to me, I want to reflect on just three of many lessons that I believe can be learned from my perspective of the Northern Ireland experience. Others may have different and even contradictory views.

The first lesson is the most obvious and the most important. Without it a successful political process is simply not possible. It is this: both sides must want it to work. They must be convinced that agreement and the inevitable compromise involved with it is better than continued conflict. Some may well indicate they want a resolution but really want it on their own terms. Others will say they want a resolution when they really want to avoid taking the blame for not wanting a solution. Timing is as important as substance.

In Northern Ireland unionists were slow to accept or appreciate that after the fall of the majority rule Parliament at Stormont in 1972, some form of power sharing was inevitable. And when they did, constitutional nationalists set the bar too high to achieve it.

More significantly it was not until the late 80s or early 90s that the republican movement finally began to consider a political resolution. They could undoubtedly have continued with

their campaign but as Northern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom unionists did not have to 'win' they merely needed not to be defeated.

Until it was clear that the possibility of outright victory was removed there would be no prospect of peace or a political accommodation. In Northern Ireland it took several decades to get to this outcome – and several more to finally reach agreement.

The second lesson that I believe should be learned is that ultimately protagonists must be forced to choose between violence and democracy. To indulge the fiction that parties can be partially constitutional is to extend the conflict.

The path to democracy must be open for all, but it is a road that can only be travelled once the last vestiges of paramilitarism have been removed.

David Trimble once said that just because someone had a past doesn't mean that they can't have a future. That is undoubtedly right but the future must demonstrate a complete break from the practices of the past.

Many people will highlight the IRA ceasefire of 1994 or 1996 or even the Belfast Agreement as defining moments in the peace process. In their own way they were all important events, but none of them actually brought about peace, stability or the removal of paramilitary structures.

To do that it was necessary to make it clear that there was a future for every party with an elected mandate – but only if they played by the same rules as everyone else.

Once that rubicon had been crossed it was only a matter of time before a genuinely sustainable agreement could be reached. This has been good for the process and today I believe that Martin McGuinness is as committed to ensuring peace in Northern Ireland as I am.

Thirdly, I believe that if an agreement is sustainable it must be able to command widespread support across the community. Since the start of the conflict there have been many attempts

to reach agreement, but until 2006/07 none had the overwhelming support of both major parts of the community.

Any settlement that cannot command widespread support is not sustainable. Even the Belfast Agreement that received the endorsement of 71% of the population of Northern Ireland in 1998 was not able to command a clear majority of unionists. Such an outcome, where there is a significant difference in the level of support between the various communities, is a recipe for instability which will ultimately paralyse and undermine the whole process.

The success and stability of the present arrangements is predicated on the fact that there is support from right across the community. The concepts of victory for one side and defeat for the other will have no place in a sustainable process. In the Northern Ireland example for unionists there could be no negotiation on the constitutional position of Northern Ireland but there was considerable scope for determining on what basis Northern Ireland, within the United Kingdom would be governed.

Governing a society on the basis of a requirement for cross community agreement is not easy but the advantages of widespread acceptance of political structures still vastly outweigh the disadvantages.

In the years to come we will build on the peace that has been achieved and seek to create a shared society for all of our people. This will mean creating a society where there is genuine opportunity for all and where the legacy of the past can be addressed.

I believe we have something to offer in terms of our experience with conflict resolution. We can't tell other people how to solve their problems but we can explain to them how we addressed our own, not just from one perspective but from all perspectives.

Our task now is to build on what has gone before, utilise the expertise and knowledge and set out how we see Northern Ireland developing over the coming years.

We have recently secured almost £20 million from the European Union to build a Peace Building Conflict Resolution Centre at the Maze/Long Kesh Prison site. This will maximize

the economic, historical and reconciliation potential of the site and send out a powerful signal to the international community that Northern Ireland has moved beyond conflict.

Out of a site that was once a manifestation of individual, organisational and even societal failure, we want to achieve something new that demonstrates our desire to build a brighter, better and shared future for all.

The Northern Ireland Executive is helping transform our economy. The deputy First Minister and I have led trade delegations and sought to attract investment from around the world. In the last four years we attracted more jobs to Northern Ireland than in any four-year period since records began.

This year will be an historic one for Northern Ireland. We are putting Northern Ireland back on the map as a tourist destination. A few weeks ago we opened Titanic Belfast, the largest Titanic museum in the world. In a few weeks time, for the first time in many decades, Royal Portrush will host the Irish Open Golf Tournament and the new Giant's Causeway Visitor Center will open.

We still have a long way to travel on our journey but it is clear how a successful peace process can transform a society. I hope that in the years to come, we can play even a small part in helping others learn from our experience that they may be able to enjoy the benefits of conflict resolution.

And conflict resolution isn't just an academic exercise. It affects real people's lives. It can transform what was once a place synonymous with conflict to a society which is today looking optimistically to the future.

And don't just take my word for it.

Come to Northern Ireland and see for yourself. I can assure you that you will not only learn about our history but will meet a people who have endorsed our progress and have a new hope and excitement for the future that was unthinkable just a few years ago."

