

**Opening Statement by Bertie Ahern to Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation  
of the Good Friday Agreement, 20 October 2022**

A Chathaoirligh and Members

I am very grateful to you for the invitation to appear before your Committee as part of hearings you are holding in preparing a Report to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. The initiative you are undertaking is a very important one and most timely as well. At one level, your work is about marking and recalling the Good Friday Agreement as a *historical document*. But at another, it is, of course, about reflecting on the ongoing role of the Agreement as a *living charter*, a charter that continues to impact hugely on relations today within Northern Ireland, between North and South in Ireland and between Ireland and Britain. So, while your mission is, correctly, placing a focus on what happened a quarter of a century ago, it also has continuing deep relevance for all of us today.

The Good Friday Agreement was the work of many hands. It required the tireless efforts of international interlocutors like George Mitchell, Harri Holkeri, John de Chastelain, Cyril Ramaphosa, and Martti Ahtisaari, all of whom spent long periods away from their friends and families. And, of course, the contribution of President Bill Clinton has rightly been lauded – he was remarkable.

The Agreement also required the Northern Irish parties to work together, even when they could barely stand being in the same room together. I take this opportunity, Cathaoirleach, to pay tribute to them for ultimately rising to the challenge and opportunity that the moment represented.

Leadership was shown. It was shown by David Trimble and his colleagues in the UUP in working through the risks involved for Unionism in agreeing a settlement. It was shown by John Hume, supported by Seamus Mallon and their terrific team at the SDLP, in fashioning many of the concepts that came to underpin the Agreement. It was shown by Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness and their colleagues in Sinn Féin in acknowledging that the future had to be driven by exclusively peaceful, democratic means, and working tirelessly to promote that reality. And it was shown by the Alliance Party, the PUP, the UDP, the Women's Coalition and the Northern Ireland Labour group, all of whom made critical contributions during the long months of negotiation leading to Good Friday 1998.

I know, Colleagues, that I am in danger of being accused of running off lists saying what I have just said. But today's occasion is about the record, and I feel it is important for me to record my acknowledgement of the pivotal role played by all those I have mentioned in arriving at the historic outcome we achieved in 1998. Of course, the particular leadership role of David Trimble and John Hume, as the leaders of the two largest parties at the time,

was internationally recognised by the awarding to them of the Nobel Peace Prize that December.

There is one other factor that I must mention – and that is the close collaboration of the British and Irish Governments. Without that, quite frankly, agreement could not have been reached. When I became Taoiseach in June 1997, I knew that my core priority was to find common cause with my also newly elected British counterpart Tony Blair. My observation of the evolution of the Northern Troubles from 1969 onwards was that it was only by the two Governments working hand in glove that progress could be made on Northern Ireland. Luckily for me, I found in Tony Blair somebody of precisely the same view. Over the following ten months, we lived that shared view on literally a daily basis. In recording that, can I also pay tribute to the tremendous support we got from our Ministerial colleagues and the very fine officials on both sides, who worked night and main to deliver on the outcome, which was never guaranteed but which we all knew was worth straining every fibre for our being for.

And so the settlement was hard won. As John Hume remarked, in his Nobel lecture, “there will be no victory for either side.”

The compromises on decommissioning, the release of paramilitary prisoners, and on changes to the Constitution were difficult. In some cases, we were asking people whose families had suffered personally in the conflict, to accept the release of the person responsible for the murder of their brother, sister, father, or mother.

You have heard from others of the huge challenges and flux of the closing weeks and days of the negotiations, particularly after George Mitchell announced his deadline of the 9<sup>th</sup> of April. Everybody was torn in pretty much equal measure between the scale of the risks involved in accepting the compromises required, and at the same time the prize available if agreement could be secured.

And so things ebbed and flowed right down to the wire until the deal was finally done, a day late for George’s deadline, but providentially on Good Friday, the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1998. Six weeks or so later, there was another red-letter day when on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, the Agreement was ratified by the people of Northern Ireland and in this State in simultaneous Referenda, a profoundly important feature of its terms.

Nothing about securing that Agreement was easy. And you don’t need me to tell you that nothing about its implementation has been easy either.

But let nobody say that it has not made a difference and a huge one at that. Today, almost 25 years later, we can look back on a generation of peace, a generation in which the guns have been largely silent, a generation in which a life unimaginable over the previous three decades has been possible for everybody in Northern Ireland. To paraphrase John Lennon, peace has been given a chance, and the results have been remarkable.

But by the same token, we have also learned that closing the deal, so critical in its own right, in many ways was politically just a beginning. The years since Good Friday 1998, while bringing many dividends, have also been characterised by continuing political turbulence, particularly over the last six years since the fateful decision by the UK to leave the EU, and as the implications of that for Northern Ireland unfolded.

I am out of active politics for a long time now, so it is not for me to prescribe this or that strategy from the sidelines to those in office today. I remember how much I used to love when that happened to me in my own day! I wish everybody involved today very well – the two Governments and the parties. I don't envy them the task they have.

But I hope as an old-timer, I can be allowed a few words of general advice – and I put it no stronger than that.

It seems clear to me that, as we approach the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Agreement, we use the opportunity to remind ourselves why it was necessary in the first place and the principles that lay at its heart. That means focussing on continuing its work, building and strengthening its Institutions, redoubling our efforts on reconciliation and mobilising the support of new generations around its promise.

Above all, I suggest, Cathaoirleach and Colleagues, we must continue the focus on the Agreement's core value - the respect for, and accommodation of, difference. Shortly before his sad death in January 2020, Seamus Mallon published his fine memoir, entitled "Shared Home Place". Those were his words to describe that principle that he and John Hume had been promoting for decades, that the only way forward is in solutions that work for everybody.

That was the spirit at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement and it is clear to me that it must be the spirit at the heart of how current difficulties are resolved – whether one is talking about the Northern Ireland Protocol, the restoration of the Executive and Assembly, Legacy or the range of other challenges facing us.

That will require leadership by everybody. It will require risk-taking by everybody. And it will involve compromise. But just like my generation was able to do nearly a quarter century ago, I feel sure that the leaders today will be able to rise to that challenge.

I said at the outset that the Good Friday Agreement was a *living charter*. More importantly, it remains the settled will of the people of Northern Ireland, as expressed in that Referendum of 1998. I have full confidence that those two realities mean we can all face the future with confidence, guided by the principles and spirit agreed nearly 25 years ago and which remain our enduring compass points.

Thanks again Cathaoirleach for this opportunity and I look forward to the conversation with your Committee.

Ends /////