

**OPENING STATEMENT BY DR. MARTIN MANSERGH, MRIA, TO  
THE OIREACHTAS JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE  
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT,  
THURSDAY, 19 JANUARY 2023, FROM 13.30**

I would like to thank the Cathaoirleach Deputy Fergus O' Dowd and members for this opportunity to reflect on the Good Friday Agreement 25 years on. As I recall, I was once a member myself of this Committee.

I am delighted to be here with two former colleagues. Wally Kirwan was a key figure as Assistant Secretary in the Taoiseach's Office, indefatigably handling information, writing drafts and making indispensable inputs into both Northern Ireland and European policy. He led the secretariat behind the modernization of the Irish nationalist position in the New Ireland Forum of 1983-4, which recognized the unionist tradition and its validity for the first time. Ambassador Eamonn McKee made an incisive contribution to internal deliberations on reformulating Articles 2 & 3, but was also a frontline observer and liaison during stand-offs at Drumcree.

The Good Friday Agreement was both a peace settlement, ending a violent conflict lasting 25 years, and a political settlement that had to redraw the one of 1921-2 creating Northern Ireland, because of its shortcomings. Last week, Sir Keir Starmer in Belfast called the Agreement 'the biggest

achievement of the Labour Party in his lifetime, without question', and praised not only Tony Blair but also John Major. The Agreement covered all issues, and involved all NI parties, bar the DUP. The two Governments, regardless of other differences or developments, recognize a shared responsibility to maintain peace in Northern Ireland within the democratically endorsed parameters of the Agreement.

My own involvement as advisor to different FF Taoisigh from Haughey to Ahern centred latterly on the formulation of broad principles that could bring the conflict to an end and offer an alternative political path. This involved direct back-channel discussions mediated through Fr. Alec Reid, Redemptorist priest, in 1988 with Dermot Ahern, in 1993-4 and in mid-1997 on my own. Written messages and draft replies to and from the Taoiseach Albert Reynolds, deemed to have come through Fr. Reid, were shared in close partnership with and advised upon by Seán O hUiginn, heading up the Anglo-Irish control centre in the Department of Foreign Affairs. Trust had to be created through the channel, despite the serious political risks for all.

In the Downing Street Declaration of 15 December 1993, the principle of self-determination concurrently exercised complemented the principle of consent. It included two key statements, the aspirational one formulated by John Hume that 'Irish unity would only be achieved by those who favour this

outcome persuading those who do not, without coercion or violence'. The second by the Taoiseach considered that the lessons of Northern Ireland 'show that stability and well-being will not be found under any political system which is refused allegiance or rejected on ground of identity by a significant minority of those governed by it', a principle that operates both ways regardless of who is the minority.

A second phase of involvement was overseeing politically the replacement of Articles 2 and 3, working with the Attorney General David Byrne and his senior official James Hamilton. While legally watertight, the wording had to be accessible and have public appeal. 'Entitlement' to Irish citizenship in the North, meaning a right which did not have to be taken up, squared the circle of the one-nation and two-nation theories. Constitutional recognition of the diaspora was much welcomed.

Article 3 talks about the firm will of the Irish people 'in harmony and friendship' to unite everyone on the island. The Shared Island initiative, which is without prejudice to any future constitutional choice, is reflective of and consistent with that spirit. There is a danger in ratcheting up pressure, with claims that unity can be brought about in seven years' time, because of demographic change, or the Government creating citizens' assemblies and a Ministry of National Re-Unification, as if unity is almost inevitable, and can be shaped without unionism.

We have recently commemorated the centenary of this State and most people cherish the democratic stability and progress achieved. Despite some past vicissitudes, the experience of the minority tradition has shown that there is life after the Union. The Agreement envisages the decision on a border poll by the Secretary of State being evidence-based, when it is likely to result in change, which means estimated initial opinion in favour being steady at well above 50% + 1. When we see the difficulties experienced by the evenly balanced Good Friday Agreement that had 70% NI support in the 1998 vote, what makes us sure that far more sweeping change would be easier?

A united Ireland would not be like German unity, where the stronger part absorbed the discredited other. It would *de facto* be about creating a successor state to both the Republic and Northern Ireland, bringing together the best elements of each. It would likely entail significant reappraisal of ethos and identity both north and south as well as Ireland's history and place in the world. Until enough people all round are ready for this, then we must focus on making the Good Friday Agreement work better. It has saved lives, and given us peace and stability, though not enough reconciliation, abolition of the hard border, and valuable sectoral cooperation and even integration. The overriding responsibility of everyone is to ensure that whatever further evolution in relationships takes place is kept on a strictly peaceful path.

