

Opening Statement by Bronagh Hinds to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, 2 March 2023

A Chathaoirligh and Members

I appreciate being invited to appear before this Committee as part of your hearings in preparation of a Report to mark the 25th Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement.

I want to begin by expressing outrage at the attempted murder of Detective Chief Inspector John Caldwell last week. There can be no tolerance of such attacks, or of the continuing presence of paramilitarism of any colour in Northern Ireland. My thoughts are with DCI Caldwell and his family. I think of his son and the other children who were bystanders to this horrific attack - the new generation for whom we negotiated a peaceful and promising future in 1998. For Omagh it is devastating. We all remember the heartbreak of the Omagh Bomb cutting through the sense of security and peace engendered by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement - an Agreement welcomed by citizens across Ireland North and South.

Introduction

I participated in the two years of the Multi-Party Talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement on behalf of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. I co-founded the Coalition, managed our election to the Talks and was the strategic advisor throughout to our elected representatives Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sagar.

Election to the Talks

The 1996 election to the Talks saw 10 parties, big and small, participate with relatively equal representation. Designed to enable representatives of Loyalist paramilitaries to be included with a legitimate electoral mandate - Sinn Féin had already demonstrated theirs - we seized the opportunity to address the deficit of women witnessed in previous negotiations.

Senator George Mitchell reflected that "the cause of women in Northern Ireland is essential to the cause of peace". Our conflict has shown us, and the world, that including women and civil society has a positive impact on the capacity to make and sustain peace. Northern Ireland is included in Ireland's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security; and Ireland is providing international leadership on these lessons at the UN and in support of efforts to resolve other conflicts.

The Coalition brought skills to the negotiations - leadership, strategy, managing complexity, policy, drafting, active listening, relationship building, dialogue

facilitation, negotiation and managing competing interests. Our links into the heart of communities gave us confidence to represent grassroots concerns and aspirations. We were used to working across conflict divides, finding ways to manage the our differences that for others seemed to be intractable conflict.

In the Negotiations

Throughout negotiations we remained focused on our twin goals of women's equal and meaningful participation, and achieving agreement on a durable settlement that would win people's consent. We had an eye to making the negotiating process work - building trust and relationships, challenging those throwing obstacles into the works, clearing miscommunications, spotting difficulties in advance and offering alternatives.

One strategy was to challenge language and behaviour - antagonism, bullying, sectarianism, sexism, misogyny, demonising and threatening behaviour - all deeply corrosive of the process. Calling those who were prepared to dialogue and compromise 'traitors' was intended to intimidate and, indeed, life-threatening. We were called 'naïve' when we challenged hateful rhetoric, but we were far from naïve. Abuse was being used to derail negotiation and thwart political progress. So we continued to stand our ground and the strong public reaction to the offending parties forced them to moderate their behaviour.

Our approach was different to that of other parties. We worked from principles - inclusion, equity and human rights - to guide our positions and our decisions on others' positions. Those who joined the Coalition signed up to being 'willing to reach an accommodation'.

Efforts to pigeon-hole us into one or other side of the divide, or drive a wedge between women from different political or religious traditions met with failure. We refused to take a position on the constitution on the basis that in negotiating we would reframe Northern Ireland's constitutional arrangement; we preferred to put our energy into finding the new solution rather than defending traditional positions.

We were prepared to live with ambiguity and experiment with various configurations until we reached consensus. We sought to be creative and innovative, explore all ideas and options, offer solutions, and re-frame issues to assist agreement.

In his Statement, Tim O'Connor set out the key strands and issues in the negotiations - we contributed to all. We did not win the support of other parties for a new electoral system that would deliver more diverse representation. Instead, parties settled on widening participation with 6 rather than 5-seat constituencies

(elected by PRSTV). It was disappointing to see the Assembly resile from this later, reducing the number of MLAs by 18.

Not all elements of the Agreement have been given the same attention. Alert to governing challenges after protracted conflicts, we proposed the Civic Forum. We wanted to harness the expertise of social and economic actors to assist the Executive and Assembly to focus on and drive forward economic prosperity and social cohesion. Although the Assembly has been resurrected many times, the Forum was abandoned with the first Assembly suspension despite being legislated for in the Northern Ireland Act. The economic bounce we should have had after a peace agreement was lost.

We were strong advocates for the provisions on human rights, equality and reconciliation, adding substantially to these sections. We championed the right of women to full and equal political participation; integrated education and mixed housing; and, importantly and alone among the parties, recognition and provision for the victims of violence.

In his Statement Mark Durkan called for honesty about divergences and deficits in implementation. The Civic Forum is one example. Despite work by the Human Rights Commission there is still no Bill of Rights. When I was Deputy Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission we were in discussion with the Office of the First and deputy First Minister on a promised Single Equality Act which has yet to appear.

It is essential that we have no diminution of rights, safeguards or equality due to Brexit, and sufficient resourcing of the equality and human rights commissions North and South to monitor and protect these. There is concern that victims rights may be diminished under the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill; the NIHRC views it as failing to comply with the standards set in the Victims' Directive.

Brexit has utterly changed the context. Civil society was instrumental in developing pathways to peace, facilitating backchannels, resolving peace-line conflicts, building cross-community relations and maintaining social and economic fabric. It helped establish the conditions for negotiations and referenda. It significantly contributed to Jacques Delors' vision of a Europe of citizens, playing leading roles in establishing and leading pan-European networks and developing the EU's social dimension. The EU invested in our social and economic reconstruction as well as peace and reconciliation. Reducing EU relations to the equivalent of a lesser version of the old European Economic Community is insufficient. I am drawn to Mark Durkan's suggestion of creatively exploring how Strands Two and Three could answer some of the problems created by Brexit.

As a living document the Agreement should continue to evolve, progress and enhance. We should expect the number of North/South bodies to increase from the initial six bodies, and the Government's Shared Island initiative is a very welcome underpinning of relationships and joint projects.

What else should we see moving forward?

- We should take account of changing demographics and impact on patterns of representation. Should we revisit the Assembly's voting mechanisms to ensure that they properly takes account of increases in those designated as 'other'?
- Paramilitaries exploit children and young people, deal drugs, act as loan sharks, intimidate and, as reported recently, threaten to burn Northern Ireland down if they don't get their way. Enough had been spent on their transition; we must have an end to paramilitary control and criminality. We must ensure that no public funds find their way into their hands and instead significantly more is invested in women and young people.
- The Executive should lead a comprehensive reconciliation strategy, with an effective implementation plan and monitoring. Politicians must example reconciliation in their leadership, language and behaviour.
- Priority should be given to victims and survivors of conflict and an appropriate approach to the legacy of the past.

Thanks and Conclusions

I thank those who helped us reach agreement: Senator George Mitchell and Co-Chairs John de Chastelain and Harri Holkeri and their teams; the Irish, N.Irish and British officials; Secretary of State Mo Mowlam; and Irish and British Ministers, I want to mention Nora Owen and Liz O'Donnell in the Irish Delegation.

For the US President Clinton consistently encouraged parties to go the extra mile and Hillary gave visibility to women. The EU's extensive financial support funded Northern Ireland's community infrastructure enabling them to survive and thrive.

Brexit shredded the British-Irish partnership, as much by the way the UK Government conducted the process as by the act itself. John Major and Tim O'Connor testified to the converse example - the respect and partnership between two sets of Prime Ministers and Taoisigh who stepped back from their traditional sides and worked together for the singular purpose of delivering peace. This was essential to enabling an effective process and reaching agreement. Signs are, that the current UK Prime Minister has discarded the approach of his predecessors for one that is more conducive to making progress.

My critique of the implementation of the Agreement is in the spirit of review and renewal after 25 years. A quarter of a century! We should and must mark the Agreement's success. It stopped decades of violence and saved countless lives, and despite the challenges, peace will endure. Young people are growing up to a better future, with new expectations and aspirations. We have seen exponential growth in female politicians and party leaders. It has shown us opposing politicians working together, at least part of the time! The Agreement created the framework within which peace, reconciliation and prosperity is possible; it's still a work in progress.

However imperfect, and all peace processes and agreements are, ours is recognised as a success globally with lessons to share. We are also pioneers in women's engagement in negotiating peace and security. It was not until two years after the Agreement that the UN Security Council passed its seminal resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. Many N.Ireland women have assisted peace building and negotiations in conflicts across the globe.

I trust the political parties have exhausted their use of the revolving door at Stormont and, now with the Brexit impasse resolved, they will speedily return to the Assembly. We cannot afford the instability that serves only to squander the benefits. In the final days of the Talks we put a proposal on the table seeking collective responsibly and collaboration in selling the Agreement for the referenda. We failed because parties were not ready for that then. A quarter of a century later it is time for parties to step up to cabinet government, to leave hurts and old enmities outside the door, to stop working in silos and to govern collaboratively for the good of all.

Thank you again Cathaoirleach and colleagues for this opportunity to contribute evidence and views to your exploration of the Good Friday Agreement. I am happy to answer any questions.