



Lesson Plan: Exploring the Good Friday Agreement through Oireachtas Debates

Objectives

At the end of this lesson students will:

1. Gain an understanding of the Good Friday Agreement and its significance in Irish history
2. Learn how to analyze primary sources, specifically Oireachtas debates
3. Practice their critical thinking and debate skills

Resources

- Computers or tablets with internet access. Alternatively relevant extracts can be displayed on whiteboard or handed out
- [Copies of Relevant Oireachtas debates](#)
- [Address by UK Prime Minister Tony Blair November 1998](#)
- [Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement](#)

Introduction (10 minutes)

- Introduce the topic of the Good Friday Agreement, explaining its significance in Irish history.
- Ask students if they have heard of the Good Friday Agreement before. If so, ask them to share what they know. If not, provide a brief overview.
- Explain that today we will be exploring the Good Friday Agreement through the lens of Oireachtas debates.

Development (40 minutes)

- Divide the class into groups of three or four and assign each group a different selected extract from Oireachtas debates related to the Good Friday Agreement. The speakers are the leaders of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, The Labour Party, Democratic Left and the Green Party)
- Provide each group with a copy of their assigned debate and ask them to read through it carefully, taking notes on the main arguments made by their selected speaker.
- Once each group has had time to read through their debate, reconvene the class and ask each group to present a summary of the main arguments made during their debate. Encourage other students to ask questions and offer their own thoughts on the debate.

- As a class, discuss the significance of the Good Friday Agreement and how the debates provide insight into the background and negotiations that led to the Agreement.

Conclusion (10 minutes)

Collect the reflections and use them to guide a class discussion on the Good Friday Agreement, its ongoing impact on Irish society and how it is viewed 25 years on from its signing

Additional Activities

It may be useful to [watch the address](#) by the United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair to a Joint Sitting of the Dáil and Seanad in November 1998

[The Joint Committee on The Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement](#) considers issues arising from Ireland's role as a signatory to the Good Friday Agreement and ongoing developments in the implementation of the Agreement. Its' work will also be of interest in any study of the Good Friday Agreement

Selected Extracts

(Full Text Available At <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1998-04-21/7/>)

The Taoiseach (Bertie Ahern)

I am laying before the House a settlement for peace in Northern Ireland. The political Agreement concluded between all the participating parties on Good Friday, 10 April, represents a major breakthrough in terms of consolidating peace and ending 30 years of conflict. The Agreement is historic in the true sense of the word. It not only supersedes previous initiatives but replaces the legislation and settlement of 1920 and 1921. In its place is an Agreement capable for the first time of winning the support of both traditions in the North, and the support of North and South, as well as enhancing co-operation throughout these islands. It is the culmination of many years of effort devoted to the peace process, the three stranded talks which began in 1991 and, more recently, the many meetings I held, before and during my attendance at the talks. All these have come together in one Agreement.

The whole basis of the settlement is the recognition that we have to live together on this island and for that we need peace, stability and reconciliation. Neither tradition has the means to impose its will on the other. An accommodation is essential for the well-being and prosperity of all. Inevitably, this will involve for everyone changes in our ways of thinking, greater tolerance and generosity and a more sympathetic understanding of the needs of others. We have to foster confidence in all sections of the community.

John Bruton (Leader of Fine Gael and Leader of the Opposition)

For the Good Friday Agreement to work, we must decide to replace the politics of aspiration, with the politics of accommodation. The parties to the Agreement acknowledge “the substantial difference between our continuing and equally legitimate political aspirations”. They go on to say that their object is “reconciliation and rapprochement”. These differing aspirations — a United Ireland on one side and unqualified membership of the United Kingdom on the other — are, as the Agreement states, equally legitimate, but they are opposite and not reconcilable terms. If the two communities continue to define themselves in ways that cannot be reconciled with one another, there will be difficulties in achieving the rapprochement sought by the Agreement between them. The Agreement itself contains a voting procedure that requires parties to designate themselves as adherents of one of two opposite aspirations. As long as the two communities define their very existence in irreconcilable terms, arguments on almost any topic that appeal to one community will tend to create fear in the other community. This is a difficulty in selling the Agreement.

I welcome the fact that the Constitution explicitly recognises the diversity of identities that exist. The object of the Constitution in regard to unity now is to “unite all the people in the diversity of their identities”. This recognises the exclusively Irish identity of Nationalists, but it also recognises the British and Irish identity of Unionists. This is a realistic, and honourable, constitutional provision. Constitutions should not contain material that is unrealistic. The new wording of the Constitution is realistic.

Ruairí Quinn (Leader of the Labour Party)

This Agreement is an historic achievement, and many people have over time contributed to its creation. As an architect, I am reminded of the task of constructing the great gothic cathedrals of Europe, which projects spanned generations and whose design evolved in detail over time. This Agreement is undoubtedly a complex edifice accommodating many components, all of which have been carefully put in place and arranged in a balanced manner. The entire edifice is an integral entity and cannot be selectively or partially approved.

This Agreement is not the beginning of the end of the conflict on this island, it is the end of the beginning. The components of the Agreement in their entirety must have a significant degree of party-political support and subsequent endorsement by the people in a referendum and plebiscite in both jurisdictions. Only then will the duties and obligations which fall from the Agreement impact upon all of us, North and South, and on both these islands off the west coast of Europe. I will focus on the issues which the electorate in the Republic will have to face on 22 May. In addition to giving our assent to the contents of this document the citizens of the Republic are asked to agree to changes in the texts

of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution. In so doing, and as part and parcel of the historic compromise that characterises this document, the people are giving up a territorial claim to the integrity of the island. That is a big step to take and one which causes concern among many people, North and South.

Proinsias De Rossa (Leader of Democratic Left)

The Agreement was not a victory for any one party. It was a victory for reason, dialogue and, most of all, the countless people who have yearned for an end to the terrible cycle of violence that has blighted Northern Ireland for so long. It was, a compromise as all agreements between diametrically opposed objectives must be. Everyone gave something and everyone got something. Inevitably, there are supporters of parties who believe that their side gave too much or did not win sufficient concessions from the other side.

This is where real political leadership is required. The quality of the political leadership of those involved in the negotiations will now be measured by their ability and determination to actively convince their supporters of the merits of the package that was agreed. There is no room for equivocation or sitting on the fence.

The Agreement must be sold to the people for what it is, and not for what some people would like it to be. It is not an automatic escalator to a united Ireland and neither does it copperfasten the union for all time. It neither rules in or rules out either option. It creates unique political structures to cater for the unique political difficulties in Northern Ireland and the conflicting national allegiances of Unionists and Nationalists. More than ever before it puts the destiny of Northern Ireland in the hands of its people with both Governments spelling out in explicit detail that there will be no change in the constitutional position without the consent of the people there, and that they will facilitate whatever choice the people make about their futures.

The Agreement is a painstakingly constructed accommodation between Nationalism and Unionism, which is in itself a great achievement.

Trevor Sargent (Leader of the Green Party)

The Agreement is a development of deep historical significance. The Governments of the two nation States contesting the territory of Northern Ireland, with most of the political parties of the region, have agreed a set of proposals which transcend the narrow confines of nationalism, whether of the British or Irish variety. A post-nationalist settlement is emerging which has great potential not alone for the people of the North, Ireland as a whole and for all who live on these islands, but which has potential to give a lead to the wider world, within the EU and beyond it, as we approach the 21st century.

It is to be hoped that in so doing it will be possible for an evolutionary dynamic to develop so that in time the remnants of the old conflict which distort the democratic structures outlined in the Agreement can fall away and the potential for developing a truly post-modern set of political arrangements where identity and territory are no longer the defining ideas of State building can begin.

Aspects of the Agreement, including proposals for police reform, prisoner release, victim support — although I support those who say it should be stronger, more clearly stated and more effective — human rights in general, equality legislation and the Irish language, if acted upon with generosity and imagination will greatly enhance the opportunities presented.