

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

The role of Government in Lesson Sharing and Conflict Resolution

**Address by Dermot Ahern, T.D., Minister for Foreign Affairs
Mediation Northern Ireland Conference
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Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here at this landmark conference.

I would like to pay tribute at the outset to Mediation Northern Ireland and its inspirational founder and director Brendan McAllister.

As he prepares to take his leave of Mediation Northern Ireland, I wish him well in his new and challenging role as one of the four Victims Commissioners for Northern Ireland.

For professionals and community activists to embark on mediation was a courageous undertaking in the Northern Ireland of 1987.

It was a leap of faith to believe that mediation could be a vital instrument in shaping a new future for Northern Ireland.

But they were true believers that mediation – the construction of channels of communication and eventually bridges between those in conflict - was not only possible but absolutely necessary.

Northern Ireland in 1987 presented a challenging landscape for all peacemakers.

While the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 had represented a major breakthrough in terms of intergovernmental cooperation, the unionist leadership opposed it and in January of 1987, some 400,000 unionists had signed a petition rejecting it.

Paramilitary campaigns from myriad organizations continued to take their toll of victims.

In November, the IRA exploded a bomb at a Remembrance Service at Enniskillen, killing eleven and wounding sixty three. Ninety eight would die as a result of the conflict in that year.

The paramilitary ceasefires lay seven years in the future. The Good Friday Agreement lay eleven years ahead. It would be twenty years beyond 1987 before the establishment of a stable power sharing government in Northern Ireland.

On the surface, 1988 would not be much better. One act of violence spawned another. Three IRA members were killed in Gibraltar and their funeral would be attacked by a loyalist which left three dead and fifty injured. This in turn led to more funerals at which two British Army soldiers would be killed by the IRA. These grisly scenes

seemed to sum up the futility of the cycle of violence in Northern Ireland. Overall, 104 would die as a result of the conflict that year.

But beneath this grim surface, attempts were being made to nurture politics. They were very much exploratory contacts but would in the end lead to real politics. By politics I mean the art of calculation, persuasion and agreement without the use of force or the threat of force.

By the end of 1987 a “talks-about-talks” process would begin involving the British Government and the combined leadership of the UUP and DUP, and the Government here had, of course, its own direct channels with the UUP.

In January 1988, John Hume would meet Gerry Adams in what was to be first in a series of talks about helping to create the conditions for peaceful negotiations.

As a new T.D. in 1988, I was myself also involved in early contacts between Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin organized by Fr Alec Reid. There was risk in all of these meetings, and no guarantee of success.

Subsequent years would witness more violence and death. But these initial encounters in 1987 and 1988 were the early roots of what would become the “peace process”, leading to the ceasefires of 1994 and 1997.

But it is important to recognize that the role of Government – or in the case of Northern Ireland, the role of the two Governments – did not begin with the peace process.

In reality, the Irish Government had itself always pursued an active “peace policy”.

Irish policy was always predicated on the notion that the problem of Northern Ireland could only be approached in its widest, totality of relations context.

Different interpretations of how to accommodate the differing relationships involved were profoundly influenced by the notions of identity, sovereignty and consent.

In our view, this conundrum- this nexus of interrelated problems - could not be solved by violence. Indeed, it was always our view that violence was not only completely wrong morally but simply reinforced the difficulties we faced, as insistence was met with resistance, and contested allegiances sometimes made the stuff of life and death.

I will not delay over the chronology of the peace process itself. Suffice to say that its progress and success depended on the intersection of a series of dynamic processes which needed to coincide if peace were to be secured.

Working together, the Governments could coordinate the willing and seek to influence the unwilling. It took time and patience.

When the tide of events flowed quickly, the role of government would be very focused and very prominent. But equally as events ebbed from public view, governments would continue to build the conditions for another phase of engagement and progress.

As such, the key role of Governments was to set the context for eventual talks and a political settlement.

In the case of Northern Ireland, the fundamental issue which generated the eruption of instability in 1969 was inequality and the absence of what we in Government in later years termed “parity of esteem”.

In 1985, both Governments agreed a formal agenda to tackle these issues. That agenda included protecting rights and identities, preventing discrimination and ensuring fair employment, the critical policing issue, prisoners, confidence in the security forces and in the administration of justice, and cross-border social and economic cooperation.

Without this essential engagement on the underlying issues, the alternate political agreements would have been fragile, with major unresolved issues retaining the potential to overwhelm the political settlement.

If half of all peace agreements seem to collapse into violence within five years, it is because the contested issues have reasserted themselves in a way which overwhelms the capacity of the political arrangements which have been negotiated.

That is not to say that all issues need to be resolved for an agreement to endure; but it does mean that outstanding issues should be capable of resolution within the settlement framework.

For agreements to succeed, the capacity of outstanding issues to destabilize a settlement must be recognized and systems put in place to ensure that they are resolved peacefully in the medium to long term.

In the context of the Good Friday Agreement, two key outstanding issues – issues which could only be addressed in the context of an enduring peace – were the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and policing.

Structures and processes were put in place to deal with them, respectively the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning and the Patten Commission.

The reality, therefore, for a peace process to succeed is that Governments, and indeed the international community, must assume their responsibility in addressing and resolving issues once these are identified. And by the international community, I mean the collective will of relevant governments, including in many cases that of the United Nations.

This fundamental rationale applies to conflicts great and small. In Darfur for example, the mediation process will only succeed with the combined will of Khartoum, those governments closest to it, including for example China, and the international community to address the underlying issues.

Equally in the Middle East, mediation cannot substitute for addressing and redressing the key underlying issues.

But it can and does play a critical role in identifying such underlying causes, and in helping create the framework for durable agreements and indeed building the relationships without which no agreement, however finely constructed, can take root and prosper.

And as the Northern Ireland experience demonstrates, addressing the underlying issues generating conflict – even when undertaken by two Governments working in close partnership – takes enormous resolve, commitment and above all else tenacity.

The very duration of this conflict and the success of our peace process convinced me that we had learned lessons about conflict resolution and that we ought to share them.

To that end the Irish Government announced Conflict Resolution Initiative which places Conflict Resolution and mediation at the core of our foreign policy.

The core of that Initiative is contained in the 2007 – 2012 Programme for Government where the Irish Government has declared a foreign policy goal;

- *to establish Ireland as the model UN State, a world leader in development assistance, humanitarian rapid response and conflict resolution.*

More specifically we commit to the full implementation of the following specific measures over the lifetime of this Government;

1. The establishment of an Academic Centre for Conflict Resolution.
2. The establishment of an annual €25 million Stability Fund, to fund specific efforts on the area of conflict resolution and post conflict issues in the developing world.
3. The establishment of a system of roving ambassadors to crisis regions.
4. The funding of a number of fourth level scholarships in the conflict resolution area.

Today I can report that this initiative is on track for full implementation;

I have recently written to the heads of the main academic institutions inviting them to participate in a process on consultation on the establishment of the Academic Centre for Conflict Resolution. We hope to issue a formal tender for the Centre later on this year.

The stability fund has been established to support conflict resolution efforts. By 2011 it will have grown to the target annual €25 million level as set out in the Programme for Government.

We have also begun the funding of PhD scholarships in the field.

On the commitment to establish a system of roving ambassadors I was delighted earlier this year to appoint Nuala O'Loan as our first roving ambassador with special responsibility for Timor Leste.

We are also publishing an *Objectives Paper* setting out strategy and priorities. Mediation will be a key instrument in our approach and lesson sharing a major core theme.

In implementing this strategy it is important to stress that we not claim the transferability of “lessons learned” from one specific context to another.

As I said to the Parliamentary Assembly of Timor-Leste in my recent visit there, “No two conflicts are the same. But the roots of conflict and conversely the foundations for peace often share common features. Through sharing lessons, experiences and indeed unresolved questions, we can advance the cause of peace.”

The very breadth of issues that were addressed over the years by both Governments, working in consort with political and community leaders and civil society, offers a rich reservoir of experience and expertise. In this regard, I count Mediation Northern Ireland as a valued interlocutor.

We will encourage lesson sharing as a key endeavour that will help improve the international community’s ability to respond effectively to conflict.

Already we have strongly supported the Mediation Support Unit of the United Nations.

We have given financial assistance to Kofi Annan’s very successful recent mediation efforts in Kenya. And we will actively seek opportunities to lend our expertise to conflict resolution processes elsewhere.

I also look forward to finding opportunities of working with Jan Egeland in his role as Special Adviser on Conflict Prevention and Resolution to the UN Secretary General.

I greatly welcome this Conference and wish to thank Mediation Northern Ireland and the Scottish Mediation Network for convening it.

I am delighted that it was timed to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. It is immensely gratifying that Belfast, formerly seen as the cockpit of the Troubles, is now chosen to showcase the vitality of your organizations and the potential of mediation to help create and sustain peace both nationally and internationally.

Finally, I want to thank you for inviting such illustrious speakers and I very much look forward to hearing their presentations.

Thank you.

Ends.