

Corrymeela Community and the Irish Association

Living Well Together Beyond 2016

Building on the Past for a Shared Future

Corrymeela Centre, Ballycastle, 3-5 June 2016

Report of the Conference Rapporteur, Duncan Morrow.

Background

Both the Corrymeela Community and the Irish Association have long pedigrees as people dedicated to reconciliation and the peaceful exploration of cultural and political issues in Ireland. In 1966, the year of the 50th Anniversary of the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, Corrymeela hosted a conference at which the then Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Terence O'Neill, gave a ground-breaking address on the potential for co-operation and the end of historic enmity. The Irish Association for Cultural, Economic & Social Relations has had an important role as a cross-jurisdictional/cross-community meeting place and forum for exchange going back to 1938. Sadly, any hopes for peaceful change after 1966 were quickly challenged by subsequent events. But fifty years after that address, and in the midst of centenary celebrations for both the Easter Rising and the Somme, Corrymeela and the Irish Association came together to create an opportunity to look back to the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme and their impact while at the same time looking forward to relationships beyond 2016. The result was this conference, designed for people who respect the past but are not bound by it, and focused on examining some of the big questions facing civic society North and South in the centenary year of such critical events.

This report is a short summary of some of the key issues discussed at the joint conference, reflecting the main issues raised by keynote speakers and by members of the audience. As with any report, it cannot convey the full richness of the event. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this report can act both as a record for the future and as a resource for all those who could not be present but have an interest in the future of Ireland, North and South and in the challenges of peace making and reconciliation in society.

Friday 3 June.

Revisiting the Rising: and its consequences

Keynote Address by Professor Lord Paul Bew, Professor of Modern History at Queen's University Belfast, and Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Standards in Public Life.

Lord Bew made a wide-ranging and provocative contribution to the conference with an important and strongly argued interpretation of the nature and implications of the 1916 Rising. He opened with the observation that many of those on official duty in Dublin around the official commemoration of the Rising in 2016 looked like they were 'going to the Dentist' and posed the question of why this was the case? He suggested that this was the result of a century of change in Irish politics that left the modern political leadership of Ireland with very different perspectives from those who had carried out the Rising.

Seen with the benefit of hindsight, Professor Bew suggested that the Rising was essentially undemocratic in nature, with the double effect of marginalising the Irish Parliamentary Party, which had been dominant in nationalist politics until that time, and of reinforcing the romanticism of violence in Ireland. He argued that in the conditions of the World War, the Rising was the triumph of enthusiasm that captured the 'imaginative sympathy' of the Irish population largely because of the growing unpopularity of the war and the response of the British authorities to what they saw as subversion.

According to Professor Bew, the values of equality and social revolution contained in the Proclamation were essentially secondary to the primary motivation of the majority of the rebels, which was the destruction of the Union with Great Britain and the establishment of an independent Irish state. Indeed he suggested that the republican movement was to some extent a revolt by the lower-middle classes of Ireland against the crown in contrast the mass mobilisation of the lower classes by the British Army in 1914. Referring to the lyrics of the classic republican memorial song for 1916, the Foggy Dew, he suggested that for many it was indeed "better to die 'neath an Irish sky than at Suvla or Sud-El-Bar."

Professor Bew noted that, at least for the first forty years, the social and economic consequences of 1916 for Ireland were essentially negative. For Paul Bew the Rising was counter-productive in so far as it led to Partition and undermined the goal of an independent all island state. "In economic terms, Ireland became dependent on emigration and the dreams of creating a nation of 20 million were dashed as Ireland struggled to increase its population above three million. Furthermore, he suggested that its primary consequence in Northern Ireland was to reinforce Unionist fears and

make the emergence of a border inevitable. While he conceded that the UVF preceded the IRA, he maintained that the Northern Gun running remained under the control of the political establishment whereas this was not the case with the Rising.

Paradoxically, for Lord Bew, Ireland only returns to its previous pre-Rising path under the political leadership of Sean Lemass after 1957, when all attempts at autarchy were abandoned and Ireland returned to a more open and global economic approach. The result of this however was an increasing distance between the political leadership of the Republic and the events and leadership of 1916.

Yet in spite of the negative balance of social and economic prosperity after the rising, Lord Bew reflected that the project of Union, as understood after 1801, had failed to engage the imaginative sympathy of the population of Ireland. Despite his critique, the Rising had succeeded in creating Irish independence and there was no evidence that this sympathy had changed since 1916. In parentheses, he also observed that devolution in the United Kingdom removes central government from any day-to-day involvement in the social and economic affairs of devolved regions, with the apparent consequence that in Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland the initial supporters of devolution have been replaced in devolved government by more radical political leadership.

There followed a lively question and answer session, led by the chair of the session who examined the legacy of violence and encouraged discussion of the apparent paradox that the Rising remained popular although its consequences were so apparently ambiguous, supplemented by a number of questions from the floor.

Saturday 4 June

Having encouraged the participants to reflect on the historic legacy of 1916, the second day of the conference focussed on present-day challenges in Ireland North and South.

An *Overview* of North-South Relations- Conference Report

Dr Katy Radford (Institute of Conflict Research (ICR))

ICR was asked to compile an everyman report on the evolving pattern of relationships on the island of Ireland for the conference. This was based on a condensed literature review and time-bound scoping study carried out with a range of contributors and sources. The focus of the report was to consider areas of

progress as well as challenges and risks in building and sustaining all-island links at a time of flux as a result of the Brexit referendum. These would include cultural, social and economic aspects and the development of North-South co-operation. The report was designed around short case-stories to prompt questions and stimulate discussion at the conference, providing a snapshot, rather than an extensive review of these areas.

Some of the key findings were:

- a. Cross-jurisdictional relationships have grown in recent years and are important to many people.
- b. There is evidence of the emergence of a degree of shared identity in Ireland and Northern Ireland as 'dealing with the past is superseded by building for the future.'
- c. Arts and Culture have a huge role to play in developing new North-South relationships.
- d. If current trends continue, the population of Ireland will rise from 6.4m to 10m over the next 50 years.
- e. 2016 has been a year of looking both sympathetically and critically at 1916. The political achievements of the events are set alongside the seeds of fracture and separation.
- f. 4.5% of the NI population were now born outside the island of Ireland, including 122,000 poles.
- g. 1 in 9 people in Northern Ireland is registered as disabled.
- h. 14m cars cross the border between Dundalk and Newry every year.
- i. Since 1990 €2.6bn has been spent by the EU PEACE programmes, €1.3bn by the Interreg programme and £760m by the International Fund for Ireland.
- j. There is a two track economic framework with the Republic dominated by the private sector while Northern Ireland is dominated by the public sector.
- k. Social and economic issues have found cross-border solutions including energy, aviation research and churches.
- l. The border continues to be a potent symbol of a divided island. Sport can be both a joining and a divisive issue. The border continues to hamper arrangements for education, housing and health services.
- m. North-South Ministerial Council is in place but has not yet fully addressed all issues, for example the transport infrastructure.
- n. Screen industries co-operate on a regular basis with joint funding and projects.
- o. Artisan food is a growing market in both parts of Ireland.

Dr Radford gave a full presentation of the findings and a written copy of the report was available for all participants. Following this presentation, there were four responses focussing on core themes in the paper:

Economics – Ann McGregor, Chief Executive, NI Chamber of Commerce.

In an incisive contribution, Ms McGregor focussed on the continuing obstacles to full economic development. While corporation tax was important for business, its importance was reducing due to the general UK reduction in corporation tax rates. For Ms McGregor, the key was the overall business environment including the provision of high quality infrastructure, the harmonisation of regulations for business and the need to ensure that costs were comparable. She drew attention to the example of differential Air Traffic duty and its consequences for Northern Ireland. She also underlined how years of conflict had created two very different business networks, giving the example of a recent appointment to an important North-South body where the new appointment had only fleeting prior engagement with the North.

Culture – Bob Collins, Chair of the Arts Council for Northern Ireland and first Chair of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland.

Bob Collins made important and insightful reflections on the state of cultural relations in Ireland. He commented that the Ireland of 1916 was like a forgotten garden which had been discovered and restored, but was, in a sense, a strange place. The decisions made in 1916 had changed both how we are and who we are. But for better or for worse, “no oblivion is available”, although, in Mr Collins’ view, the events had also “unsoldered goodly fellowship” in Ireland. He reflected that the border had created a level of distance in Ireland which had to be acknowledged, marked in the media and in culture. He noted that coverage of Northern Ireland had stopped in the south, ‘once the violence stopped’. It was, he said “difficult to break free from wrong beginnings”, but that the future would be made by small steps, marked by a degree of hesitancy. In this, culture and the arts could play a crucial role in mediating and negotiating the landscape.

Social Issues – John Hunter, Chair of Corrymeela Council and previously Permanent Secretary of the Departments of Finance and Social Development in the Northern Ireland Executive.

John Hunter used his long experience both as a Senior Civil Servant and of his senior role with the International Fund for Ireland to reflect on some critical social challenges still obvious in Ireland. He identified the persistence of poverty and social

exclusion as a real challenge remarking that no government scheme had fully succeeded in eliminating them, despite years of trying. John expressed concern that social deprivation and inequality fuel political instability, paramilitarism and sectarianism. He also noted that the International Fund had made progress in engaging a wide variety of social projects and social innovation and that division still remained. He suggested however that the civic voice had not been as prominent in recent years and that there was room to reconsider the role of civic society | change, perhaps in the shape of an all-island Civic Forum.

North-South relationships – Tim O’Connor, previously Joint *Secretary* of the North-South Ministerial Council.

In a short but important contribution, Tim O’Connor emphasised the extent of progress made in North-South relationships in recent years. He noted that the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 had been brought down within months by the North-South provisions of the deal, whereas the arrangements established since 1998, aligned to the principle of consent, had proved to be one of the most robust and stable elements in the political system. He suggested that change in North-South relations had the character of turning an oil-tanker, but that looked at over the long view. Relations since 1916 had been one hundred years of progress.

Groupwork and responses

The participants broke up into smaller groups to engage with the topics emerging from the morning. Groups were asked to note the most important aspects of the presentations, to identify areas for growth and the risks attached and to list priorities for change.

After an hour, the groups were brought back together and each shared a number of important observations in plenary:

- a. Given what we know about history, our question should be: “How do we become good ancestors?
- b. Do we need a new economic model which looks at collective human happiness and not just economic growth?
- c. It was noted that prior to the troubles there had been connections through higher education. This has largely dried up. Should we have a North-South Erasmus?
- d. One group referred to the emergence of a new ‘Rory McIlroy generation’ of young people more at ease with change and global diversity. This change in

attitude by generation is a crucial change in Irish society, less respectful of past traditions.

- e. Arts can be a crucial mechanism for change, allowing us to think about the past and the future in different ways.
- f. We should seek out common themes for deliberate co-operation including the environment and changing inter-generational attitudes. Issues like suicide awareness could also play an important role because of their practical dimension.
- g. Economics still offers lots of areas for development. These include IT, Finance, Media and Agri-Food.
- h. Something needs to be done to reduce the short-termism of the political system. A civic forum might be a contribution to that, including an opportunity to identify areas for focus. A formal 'foresight' exercise could facilitate the process of taking a long-term view. The institutional framework for such a process already exists in the form of organisations such as the Centre for Cross Border Studies (represented at the event) and the Institutes of Irish Studies scattered across these islands and beyond.
- i. In Dublin, East-West (relations with London) has taken on more importance than North-South. It was noted that cities now talk to other cities as much as countries with countries.
- j. The changing demographics of Ireland have already had a huge effect, including re-immigration. This will continue to be a dominant theme if immigration continues as foreseen in the report.
- k. It was noted that religion had not been mentioned in detail in the analyses.
- l. We need to develop an entrepreneurial culture in Northern Ireland if we are to take advantage of change.
- m. In sum it was agreed that the priorities should be
 - Arts and Culture
 - Young people and the political process
 - Long term civic thinking
 - Entrepreneurial Culture
 - Universities
 - Environment
 - Equality and the disruption of the modern economy.

Afternoon Session: Political Change

The Future in Northern Ireland: Session with Steve Aiken MLA, Claire Hanna MLA, Emma Little-Pengelly MLA, Matt Carthy MEP.

Politicians representing the four largest parties in Northern Ireland (although Matt Carthy sits for Midlands, North and West for Sinn Fein in the European Parliament) were asked to reflect on theme and did so in different ways.

Claire Hanna of the SDLP reflected on the issue of commemoration and the need to ensure that underlined the strong commitment by Colm Eastwood, the new leader of the party, to making Northern Ireland work as part of the process towards peace, and eventual Irish unity. Ms Hanna also reflected on the potential for opposition within the new Northern Ireland Assembly, welcoming the change as an opportunity to bring a new dynamic into the Assembly. She noted the potential of the United Kingdom leaving the EU. (Brexit)

Steve Aiken, a new MLA for South Antrim for the UUP talked about the prospects for better North South relations, the challenges facing the globe in the twenty first century. He suggested that Northern Ireland politics had not focussed on the real issues and needed now to identify the real risks to progress including social, economic and environmental challenges. The task, Mr Aiken agreed with Claire Hanna, was to make Northern Ireland work. He stated that he personally favoured the liberal social agenda and was strongly against Brexit. Mr Aiken concurred with Claire Hanna about the potential for opposition to change the functioning of the Northern Ireland Assembly. He also suggested that the SDLP and UUP should work together closely to form a single opposition, as neither had sufficient strength to oppose on its own and to present the prospect of an alternative government.

Emma Little-Pengelly underlined her own passionate commitment to change in Northern Ireland and referred to the Executive strategy on community relations (Together- Building a United Community (TBUC))- as evidence of the commitment of the DUP to change. She also noted however that reconciliation was hard and long work, especially given the violence in the past. She also struck a strongly optimistic note about the potential for the future and, referring to Maya Angelou's poem "And still I rise" said that she was inspired every day to keep working for that change.

In an address which was later widely circulated in the press, Matt Carthy used the conference as an opportunity to float a new Sinn Fein approach to Irish unity. While arguing strongly that partition imposed huge costs on the island of Ireland he suggested that the economic crash had created urgency among many young people to confront the past and to build a much more open, progressive and equal society. He made clear that if Britain votes for Brexit, Sinn Fein would put the issue of the

border back on the Agenda. However Mr Carthy also suggested that Unionists had nothing to fear from Irish unity. As part of that, he suggested that Sinn Fein would be open to an imaginative and accommodating approach to bringing about a united Ireland including considering the possibility of transitional arrangements including continued devolution to Belfast within an all-Ireland structure. He reiterated that unity must be achieved peacefully.

The discussion from the floor was lively and engaged. Many people probed the possibilities of opposition, for which there appeared to be a broad welcome and voiced their encouragement at the tone of the debate as evidence of continuing progress.

Address by President Michael D. Higgins, Uachtarán na hÉireann

The conference was honoured by the participation of the President of Ireland as the main evening speaker. Addressing the crucial theme of commemoration. President Higgins set the tone when he remarked that “When invited to perform an act of public remembering, and to do so in relation to what are assumed to be foundational, or contested, narratives, a protective humility surely suggests that one should try to anticipate how such act of commemoration will be remembered in the future.” He acknowledged that this year, in particular, “We are challenged to forge a public discourse that can accommodate both the Easter Rising of 1916, a founding moment in the Irish Republic's journey to Independence, and the Battle of the Somme, a terrible loss of lives which has acquired such symbolic centrality for the Unionist tradition on our island. “

In a comprehensive and important address, the President highlighted the benefit of perspective that hindsight allows us, enabling historians to research and understand aspects of history which had previously been hidden. However he also noted that the task involved a complex challenge of trying to “move easily and equally between the aspirations of communities seeking to get past the memory of old wounds so as to live in the present, not lose the future, and, on the other hand, the demands of those who read or cherish the legacy of Empire differently, and who may not agree, for example, that World War I, with its catastrophic destruction of young lives, was anything other than heroic? “

In this context, the President made a plea for a slightly different approach, which he called ‘narrative generosity and hospitality. “What we must seek to achieve, I would suggest, is a transparency of purpose, an honesty of endeavour in keeping open the possibility of plural interpretations of the past and of future revision of accepted truths, based, not just on new historical findings, but on an ethical openness to

differences of perspectives, a generosity and hospitality towards others. Indeed such generosity, a willingness to be surprised, confronted, even destabilised, in the assumptions of those foundational myths we all need as source - that is, I believe, what is required if the act of remembering is to enable us to make a fist of living together in the present. “

Drawing on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, the President suggested that ethical remembering was much preferable to any project of forgetting or denial: “Rather than any false denial of the past, then, what can be achieved through ethical remembering is, I would suggest, a certain *disposition*, a way of relating to the past that does not serve to form exclusive judgements or reinforce grievances, but, rather, to embrace the stories, the memories and the pains of the other.” Referring to traditional Irish wisdom, he noted that once this process starts, one story tends to lead to another.

In this spirit the President suggested that commemoration could be an opportunity for positive change without definitive blame or judgement. He said: “It is likely that neither side will come out unaffected from such process, and that the prism of the other will soon begin to imprint a new shape on our old stories, adding to their complexity and texture, luring us to novel, yet unexplored, places, and inviting in intriguing characters, people we had never encountered before. Perhaps, most tantalisingly, can we learn through commemoration to understand ourselves better - to engage critically with our own assumptions and prejudices.”

Emphasising the complexity of historic events, including the huge consequences for the poor and the crucial role of women, the President suggested that historians had a central role in opening up events in the past to a modern audience. However, quoting the thinking of the German-Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt he suggested that “the ability to forgive and the ability to promise are the human characteristics that guarantee our freedom from being ruled by the past or the future. If forgiveness and forgetting did not exist, every past action would be irrevocable and the present would be dominated by the past. If promising did not exist, the entire future would be unforeseeable and the present would be dominated by all the fears and uncertainties of the future.” Forgiveness was a way of remembering while robbing a wrong of its future effectiveness.

He concluded his address by congratulating Corrymeela and the Irish Association for their work and commitment.¹ The President was formally thanked by both John Hunter and Chris McGimpsey, who commented on the huge erudition of the address

¹ The full text of this address is available at <http://www.corrymeela.org/cmsfiles/news/2016/6June/PresidentsSpeech.pdf>

and the important content. After showing its appreciation, the conference then retired for a formal dinner.

Sunday 5 June

Beyond 2016: Session with leading journalists and commentators, Alex Kane and Deaglan de Breadun

In a session filled with insight, opinion and humour, two leading commentators on Irish and Northern Irish affairs reflected on change in political life and the opportunities of the future. Deaglan De Breadun reflected on Matt Carthy's contribution on the previous day, suggesting that the issue of a united Ireland had not gone away. But he noted also the danger of prediction in political affairs pointing to the speed with which unforeseen events such as the Scottish referendum on independence and the rise of Donald Trump had changed political perspectives quickly. Brexit was a potentially similar event.

But Deaglan also noted the speed of change in Ireland and Northern Ireland, evidenced above all by change in social attitudes. He suggested that conflict had a conservative effect and that as conflict has waned, so tolerance has grown. He observed that Northern Ireland now appeared to have the youngest cabinet in the world, inferring that this might be a further harbinger of change. Finally, Deaglan noted, however that the globe had become a more unstable place. The old model of stable states with unstable frontiers was giving way to a more general instability evidenced in change in many countries.

Alex Kane noted that he too had a very bad record of prediction. However he confidently predicted that a United Ireland would not happen in his lifetime and noted, in reference to Matt Carthy's proposals that the Sinn Fein project had in fact changed. This was also now true of the architecture of Northern Ireland. Alex noted that he had always been a critic of the architecture of the Good Friday Agreement because of the absence of an opposition. What he called the 'ugly scaffolding' of the Agreement had created ever-greater public alienation. However, he was now, uncharacteristically, optimistic about the potential for the future. The fact that Sinn Fein and the DUP were in government was, he said, a sign that both projects had failed in their own terms. The two-party government however had lifted 'the veil of somebody else to blame' and clarified the need to work together. Opposition now freed the other parties to propose genuine alternatives. Everywhere he saw important evidence of small change. In the week prior to the conference, the DUP retreated from their position opposing the use of donated blood by gay people in

transfusion in Northern Ireland. Significantly, according to Alex, this was justified on the basis of 'changed science'. Small changes like this, he said, made him genuinely hopeful.

Workshops – Well being and Brexit.

The conference now turned its attention to two specific issues of current importance.

The Carnegie Foundation has recently promoted work on introducing the concept of well-being into Northern Ireland, and specifically introducing it into the frameworks for the development, delivery and monitoring of policy. The author and co-ordinator of the main report, Peter Doran (QUB) introduced the concept to a workshop and identified the way in which well-being had become central to the planning for a new Programme for Government in Northern Ireland. The workshop noted two critical questions as the foundation for well-being: Am I safe? And Do I matter? If these questions can be answered positively, it turns the focus away from economic growth and towards amore general sense of shared progress.

The Brexit debate- the question of whether or not the United Kingdom should remain a part of the European Union – was undoubtedly the most important current political issues. Although the workshop could only introduce the topic and set a framework for talking about its implications, it as clear to participants that the outcome of the referendum would be of profound significance for Ireland north and south including the potential for serious change in the United Kingdom and even within Northern Ireland.

Closing Remarks- Duncan Morrow Rapporteur

The conference was brought to a close by the rapporteur who reflected on some of the key issues raised by the speakers and the workshops. Confirming the President, he observed that conferences begin rather than end conversations – one story leads to another. While summarising some of the key points of the conference, he also asked a number of his own questions, in part to shape a continuing dialogue and potentially, future conferences.

In relation to the past he posed two questions:

1. Drawing on Paul Bew's analysis that 1916 had succeeded although it was anti-democratic, was only fitfully committed to justice, and had led to general impoverishment and division, he asked: "So what is it that enables

nationalism to capture the 'imaginative sympathy' of whole peoples with such momentous consequences?"

2. Drawing on Paul Bew's insight that violence occurs in response to other issues he asked: "Commemoration too easily takes on the appearance of celebrating our own decisive acts of winning or resistance and condemning those of others. Can we discipline ourselves to always ask a further question about the past which is: 'What is our involvement in the violence of others?'"

In relation to the present he posed three questions

1. Drawing on the insight that the economies of North and South are very differently structured he asked: "Does it matter that the government in Northern Ireland appears to control the private and voluntary sectors as well as the public sector?"
2. Drawing on the insight that well being is more than GDP, he asked "How do we address the ethics of inequality? And create an economics of well-being?"
3. Drawing on the insight that 1916 represents a radical rupture at the heart of Irish politics between those who see independence as a liberation and those who see it as a threat, he asked: "Can we begin to see the Good Friday Agreement as a statement of acknowledgement that the rupture of 1916 cannot continue if we are to find a way to live together? Furthermore, how do we reconfigure our sense of self, if the enemy who was so central to that self is no longer an enemy?"

Drawing on the input of the politicians and the President, he noted the importance of the witness of presence provided by all of them in symbolising change. He also asked

1. "Is there a difference between marking, celebrating and commemorating our past?"
2. "How do we begin to acknowledge our need to learn as part of change, and our need to change without pinning all of the blame for the past on one party?"

Finally, reflecting on the potential for change beyond 2016 he observed that the really difficult risk for political leadership was facing the sacred cult at the centre of our own traditions, which insisted on the purity of our cause. What had emerged in Northern Ireland was a spat between rival claims to purity, which in practice rendered both implausible to all but their own adherents. In practice there is therefore no process of truth telling in Ireland which will vindicate 'our side' as victims which does not also convict us as perpetrators. Furthermore, once the truth-telling starts it will not only convict a few activists but spread to

our political traditions our parties and our cultural apparatus. Ethical remembering will condemn us to truth and make us reliant on forgiveness for the future. The task, he said was not to condemn this predicament but to make it visible: to replace our culture of insisting and imposing our will with a new culture of meeting and figuring out together.

The conference was formally closed by John Hunter (Chair of Corrymeela Council) and Chris McGimpsey (President of the Irish Association) with a wide variety of thanks to all who had made the event such a success.