

Irish-British Relations and the Establishment of Agreed Political Institutions in Northern Ireland

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There is a new era in relations between Ireland and Britain.

This generation of Irish and British people and leaders have transformed Irish-British relations—positively and permanently.

Ours is a close, complex and difficult history which defies easy summary.

But this generation is resolved to leave the past behind.

Today's Ireland is confident, modern and outward-looking. Our self-confidence has allowed us, still conscious of our history but not captured by it, to build a new and lasting partnership of common interests that fully respects our identity and sovereignty with our nearest neighbors.

None of what has been accomplished in Northern Ireland over the last decade and more could have happened without the most beneficial transformation in British-Irish relations in over eight hundred years.

When, as the first Irish leader ever to do so, the then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland, Bertie Ahern, addressed the Joint Houses of the British Parliament in May 2007, he remembered that “The historical relationship of Ireland and Britain too often seemed as if it could be more accurately measured out in repression and rebellions, over cycles of decades and centuries.”

The conflict in Northern Ireland was the terrible consequence and modern symbol of that difficult history between our nations. It was called an ‘intractable conflict,’ with roots too deep in history, polarized by too much violence and paralyzed by antithetical political agendas, to be resolved.

But after the work of this generation, by the Governments of Ireland and of Britain, by the political leadership and civil society of Northern Ireland, by our friends in the United States at all levels, we have achieved what many thought was impossible.

Political agreement on power-sharing in Northern Ireland; the end of the armed campaigns of the Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries and the full decommissioning of their weapons under international supervision; and the protection of human rights and identities for both communities have all been achieved.

Irish Republicans passionately hope that they will see the island of Ireland united in peace but there is an unchallengeable consensus on how any future change in the status of Northern Ireland will be effected: only with consent freely given, and with full respect for the rights of all traditions and identities on the island.

In the words of the late, and much mourned, Senator Edward Kennedy, one of the greatest and most constant of our friends in the United States in this work of peace, we built “an irresistible force to make the immovable object move.”

Central to this project—what is believed by many to be one of the most successful peace processes anywhere—has been the working partnership over the last two decades between the Governments of Ireland and Britain.

Determined political leadership in Ireland and Britain helped bring balance and confidence to the negotiations between parties in Northern Ireland, for too long hampered by ingrained distrust.

Our common membership of the European Union has been an important factor in the new relationship that Ireland and Britain enjoy today. Ireland’s membership of this broader group of European nations enabled us to widen our engagement in Europe and move away from a situation, over the generations, of economic dependence on Britain. It also gave us a forum where we worked with Britain in a European context on equal terms and often in pursuit of shared interests. It provided a place where Irish and British officials and politicians were brought together constantly to discuss policy in a range of areas, not just on concerns around Northern Ireland and the conflict.

It also opened the door to a view of the future where sovereign national boundaries were no longer the only consideration that mattered, and where freedom of movement and commerce became the norm, where overlapping, complementary identities flourished and where shared goals overtook narrow zero-sum conflicts.

By the 1990s, that European framework, combined with earlier strides in free public education, and the institution of social partnership, laid the foundation for Ireland’s rapid economic expansion, which again set a more favorable context for the resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and a more equal relationship between Ireland and Britain.

It is impossible to describe this change without referring to the vital role of the United States.

From the early 1970s senior US politicians and members of Congress took a particular interest in assisting in finding a peaceful solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland, particularly the so-called “four horsemen,” Speaker Tip O’Neill, New York Governor Hugh Carey, Senator Edward Kennedy and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

It was consistently the view of the Irish government that involvement by successive US administrations, Democratic and Republican alike, could only improve the political

context, and we greatly appreciate the support that was extended to us as we charted a path towards peace. Today, we are indebted to President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton for their active engagement and encouragement and for the appointment by the administration of a Special Economic Envoy, Declan Kelly, to help promote economic investment in Northern Ireland.

The Friends of Ireland in the US Congress have also extended vital and consistent support to the peace process. Ireland considers itself fortunate to have such wonderful friends in the United States throughout these years of peace building. One very good example of US assistance that has made a difference is the support extended to the International Fund for Ireland which has proved to be an important building block in the peace that Ireland enjoys today.

No one person exemplifies US involvement more than Senator George Mitchell who, as the envoy of President Clinton, presided over the talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

The structure of that Agreement reflected three ‘strands’ to the peace process. Strand one was relationships within Northern Ireland itself. Strand two was the relationship between the North and South of the island of Ireland. Strand three was the East-West relationship between the islands of Ireland and Britain.

Across all three we have seen transformations. In Northern Ireland, the leaders from across the political spectrum share power together in government. It is not always easy, but despite the difficulties they are making unprecedented progress. It was particularly gratifying to see Northern Ireland’s First Minister, Peter Robinson, and deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, visit the United States together for St. Patrick’s Day to share in the celebration here of that day and to promote the economic interests of Northern Ireland. It is also a source of enormous satisfaction that our global Irish family, and in particular our Irish American family, are so supportive and committed to ensuring the continuing success of the new political dispensation in Northern Ireland.

On March 9 of this year, the Northern Ireland Assembly, on an overwhelming cross-community vote, requested the devolution of policing and justice powers to those local institutions. This was decisive, joint, action on one of the most chronically contentious issues facing them.

Within the island of Ireland, work has been taken forward across a range of projects of benefit to both sides of the border—a border that is no longer even visible to the people who cross it every day. The island of Ireland is marketed jointly as one tourist destination by one shared agency. The value of coordinated planning on an island the size of Ireland is increasingly recognized and acted on.

And, between Britain and Ireland, this peace process has itself brought us closer together than could easily have been imagined twenty years ago. It has been supported by institutional arrangements like the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly and the British

Irish Council, but it is of course, first and foremost a living, hugely vibrant network of relationships in our economy, our culture, in free movement of people and families back and forth, as well as at the level of governments in Europe and beyond.

The Good Friday Agreement delivered peace and promise to Ireland by accommodating the legitimate rights, interests and aspirations of all. It represented the triumph of common interests over inherited divisions.

For decades relations between Ireland and Britain have been filtered through the prism of conflict. Now, building on the peace and progress of the last decade, we have begun to pay greater attention to the wider partnership of common interests between our two islands.

The creative tradition of the Irish people and the English language is one extraordinary illustration of the potential for our two peoples and cultures together—from Jonathan Swift and W.B. Yeats to writers today like Seamus Heaney and last year's US National Book Award winner, Colum McCann.

And today, as we face new challenges, including the fallout from the global economic crisis, we do so with the reflex of partnership and cooperation, within Europe and bilaterally. Not always with identical interests or approaches, but with an openness to engage and cooperate in ways that will bring benefit and opportunity to all our peoples.