

Peace needs Partnership

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Over the past few days, I have been reflecting about what I should say this evening and I keep coming back to the journey that has brought not just me here tonight, but also Colin and Wendy and in a wider way the people of Warrington. It has been a journey which has involved much hurt and pain. A journey for the Parry and Ball families which began when the IRA planted a bomb here in Warrington in 1993.

For me it began many years earlier on the streets of Derry in the late 1960s. The partition of Ireland left a system of political and economic discrimination in the north which set the context for 30 years of war on our streets. I have followed many coffins and stood beside many grieving families in the years since. But there can be no greater tragedy in life than parents having to bury their child. The deaths of children as a result of the conflict is something that those of us who were engaged in armed organisations, be they British or Irish, have to accept responsibility for. No child, whether they were killed with a plastic bullet fired by a British soldier or RUC man, or killed by an IRA action or by a loyalist gang, should have died.

In the natural order of family life it is the child who buries the parent. So I am mindful, as a father and a grandfather, of the unimaginable devastation caused when a parent has to bury a child. Such tragic circumstances arising out of a natural illness may allow a family in some way, over time, to find the space to anchor itself and resume life again. It is therefore almost impossible to comprehend how a family suddenly bereaved as a result of a violent incident, where a child is lost, would ever

*The Northern Ireland
Deputy First Minister
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be able to reach a point where normal life would resume again.

I know from my personal experience of meeting relatives of those killed as a result of the conflict in Ireland that their lives are never the same again; life's compass is permanently broken. And so it is with the Parry and Ball families who lost their boys, 12-year-old Tim Parry and 3 year-old Johnathan Ball in March 1993 when an IRA bomb exploded in Warrington. I remember well the tragedy; the scenes of overwhelming grief on the streets of Warrington were heart-rending.

On that Saturday morning I was in the process of making arrangements through a back channel to the British government for a meeting between myself and Gerry Kelly with a representative of the British government in Derry. Two days later that meeting happened. The British government could have walked away – but they knew, as did we – that the only resolution to the conflict lay in dialogue. There would never be a military solution to the political conflict we were in.

I also remember well the scene in Castlerock days later when four Catholics were gunned down by the Ulster Freedom Fighters as they arrived at work on a building site. I knew one of the men, Jimmy Kelly, an IRA Volunteer.

As a republican leader it would be hypocritical for me to seek to distance myself from the consequences of armed struggle or the IRA's role in it. Nor can or would I attempt to excuse the human loss caused by the IRA bomb in Warrington. Regrettably, the past cannot be changed or undone. Neither can the suffering, the hurt or the violence of the conflict be disowned by Republicans or any other party to the conflict. None of this, of course, offers any comfort to the many victims of the conflict, from all sides, including and in particular the many hundreds of innocent victims including Tim Parry and Johnathan Ball

The challenge for all of us engaged in the peace process and the political process in Ireland, and indeed for the British government also, is to ensure that there can never be a repeat of what went before. We must learn the lessons of history, we must build a durable and just peace.

In my experience of meeting those bereaved by the conflict in Ireland it never ceases to amaze me how generous and compassionate many of them are despite their loss. I am also conscious that there are others who are unable to make that journey.

A few years ago I met with Colin and Wendy Parry in Warrington. That was a significant act of generosity, reconciliation and hope by Colin and Wendy. Sadly, Johnathan's parents, Wilf Ball and Maire Comerford, are now both deceased. The reception I received here was exceptional and yet

humbling. It was symbolically as important as any of the other steps made in the peace process. It has had a lasting impact on me.

Gestures like this, though difficult personally for those bereaved, are crucial to building peace and reconciliation. It is this generosity which has made the difficult job of making peace in Ireland that much easier and rewarding. The poet Seamus Heaney, in response to the 1994 ceasefire, said that the ceasefire was an opportunity to open a space – a space where hope can grow.

I know from speaking to the bereaved on all sides of the conflict that they look for hope in the midst of their personal despair. It is this hope that they draw from: hope that their children and grandchildren will live in a world free from violence and injustice.

Some families, and the Parry and Ball families are an example of this, turn their tragedy into a worthy and personal crusade for the greater good of humanity. The setting up of the ‘Tim Parry and Johnathan Ball Foundation for Peace’ by the families was in memory of the two boys, to keep alive their innocence and the expectation of their lives, so tragically ended.

Last year I met Queen Elizabeth when she visited Belfast. I was of course very conscious of the symbolism involved in the meeting. But I was also conscious that she was a victim also. Yes, she is head of the British State, but she is a human being and one who had been bereaved at the hands of the IRA yet still was clearly a supporter of the Peace Process. I was struck by something she had said in a visit to Dublin the previous year when she laid a wreath at the Garden of Remembrance for all those who had died in the cause of Irish Freedom. At a dinner in Dublin Castle she said:

‘To those who have suffered as a consequence of our troubled past I extend my sincere thoughts and deep sympathy. With the benefit of historical hindsight we can all see things we wish would have been done differently or not at all.’

I echo those words and extend to all British and Irish who have suffered as a result of the conflict in Ireland and Britain my sorrow and sympathy for the hurt and loss endured.

She went on to say that we should be able to bow to the past but not be bound by it. That is what I see here in this building. The Warrington Peace Centre, which was opened on the seventh anniversary of the deaths of Tim and Johnathan in March 2000, is dedicated to teaching people of all ages and races how to avoid using violent methods to resolve conflict. It is a beacon of hope for the future.

Colin Parry, Tim's father, visited Ireland many times after the deaths of his son Tim and Johnathan Ball. He became a great advocate for peace in Ireland; a champion for peace and the resolution of conflict. In doing so he has made a valuable contribution to the new and peaceful society we have in Ireland today.

Since the awful tragedy in Warrington in March 1993, profound and far-reaching changes have taken place in Ireland and in relationships between the British government and the people of Ireland, nationalist and unionist. New political institutions are in place in Ireland. These institutions are based on the principles of power sharing, equality and respect for cultural diversity. For the first time in over eight centuries of troubled history the people of these islands, British and Irish and their representatives, have placed dialogue and not coercion at the centre of their relationships. These changes mean that no more people from either Britain or Ireland need risk the lives of other people or their own lives over political differences. It means that children like Tim and Johnathan in Ireland and Britain can grow from childhood to being adults without the consequences of political violence visiting them.

The Irish Peace Process is rightly held up as an example of a successful model. Myself and other peace negotiators from Ireland have travelled to conflict-torn regions all over the world to outline the story of the Irish Peace Process. My party has contributed to embryonic political settlements and peace processes in recent times in the Basque country, Philippines, Columbia and Burma. And, while we can and, perhaps, should be proud of our work beyond our own shores, we should not forget that we have much more to do at home to secure and build the peace.

The Warrington Peace Centre stands tall as a testimony to this for all of us who have sought to chart a way from conflict to peace in Ireland and between Ireland and Britain. And a timely testimony at that. Sinn Féin is disappointed that our partners in government in the north of Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party, have reneged on a Programme for Government commitment to build a peace centre at the Maze Long Kesh site. For many, given the journey we have all trodden and the changes that have come about and our work abroad as advocates of peace building, it beggars belief that we cannot agree on the building of a peace centre.

But what is it that has tripped us up? What has tripped us up is the past, how we speak about it, how we present it, and how we address it. And its role in reconciliation. Myself and Peter Robinson knew when we commissioned this project that there would be difficulties. We agreed that the peace centre would be exactly that, a peace centre. We recognised that

it could not be the preserve of any one section of the community. We also agreed what it couldn't be. It could not be a commemorative zone for any particular side or party to the conflict or a place to retrospectively validate their role in the conflict.

We advocated the need for the new site to be a genuinely shared space. And so, despite all the difficulties, we were optimistic about its future. However, it is clear that there are groups who, for various reasons, are opposed to the building of the peace centre. The peace centre has been cast by them as a shrine to those who engaged in the conflict. Nothing could be further from the truth. The glorification of conflict is the antithesis of peace building.

The exploitation of this fear has paralysed many on the unionist side and the peace centre is now in a log jam. But the exploitation of this fear has only been possible because of our collective failure to address the past. And, in hindsight, we should have known better.

Hardly a month goes by in the north that we are not faced with an anniversary of a past tragedy. Each such occasion evokes painful memories. And, while each such occasion reminds us that we have still to address the past in a way that complements and assists the building of the future we are all committed to and will serve our better interests, we have not yet applied ourselves sufficiently to this end. We cannot allow this mistake to continue.

Some politicians have sought to use victims for their own political ends. This is wrong on every level. The past cannot be allowed to destabilise the future. But it must inform our path to a better future. I am a firm believer that we can deal with every issue if we get the framework right and the context right. Thus far, when it comes to dealing with the past, we have achieved neither. Conflict resolution is about much more than ending conflict. The conflict is over, but the work of conflict resolution must continue. If we approach conflict resolution on the same basis that we approached ending the conflict then I firmly believe acknowledgements about the past can become a powerful dynamic which will move us again to new places that many believe are beyond us. Truth recovery and acknowledgment are critical to dealing with the past. They can breathe life into the quest for reconciliation. Dealing with the past will help and guide us in our building of the future. And building for the future will enable us to deal with the past.

The thinking which brought us all to the negotiating table must be maintained and must drive us forward. That is, there can be no winners. And that means there must be no losers. If we move forward on this

premiss then we are duty bound to acknowledge and respect our differences and to compromise. There is no other way. Relying on old certainties will only produce old results. We need new approaches, new relationships and new results. Within Ireland it means building new relationships and meeting challenges in a positive way with at all times an eye on building the peace and promoting reconciliation. With Britain it means building an understanding of our historical difficulties without letting them become an obstacle to good relations in the future.

Creating a new society at ease with itself is the challenge facing us now. I believe in the unity of the people of the island of Ireland. There is a democratic and peaceful way to achieve that or to reject that. It is for the people to decide. I commit to approaching that work with compassion and imagination. Dialogue, building trust, making political compromises are the seeds to achieving this new beginning. This applies globally as much as it applies at home. There are many ongoing and brutal conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and in Syria – thousands of people, including many children killed, injured or displaced from their homes. I wish the new talks process in the Middle East well. The lesson from the conflict from which we have emerged in the north of Ireland is the same for everywhere else. There are no military solutions to any of these conflicts. Politics, dialogue and diplomacy are the only guarantee of lasting peace. We need to bear this in mind as we approach World Peace Day. Compromise is not a dirty word. I am proud of the compromises which I have made in the pursuit of building peace.

When you come to a place like Warrington, when you meet people like Colin and Wendy Parry, it is very difficult not to be positive for the future. But Republicans cannot make agreements with ourselves. We need unionist partners. We need civic partners. We need to agree the direction of travel for our society and stick to that road map despite the attacks from the rejectionists be they unionist or so-called dissident republican.

At times people get frustrated, myself included, at some of the political log jams which crop up from time to time in our process. And at times people can focus on the negativity which flows from these and miss the reality that the job of government continues. Ministers are taking decisions every day; the All-Ireland and East-West political architecture continues; every day that this happens is another brick being laid on the path to a new future.

Of course we need to find a way of dealing with the past. Of course we need to put plans in place that ensure that the marching season doesn't become a byword for street violence every summer. But all of this is

doable. When you reflect on the challenges we have overcome to date – when you reflect on the journey we have all travelled – then it is patently obvious that we cannot and will not let these legacy issues drag us backwards.

So my message from Warrington – from a building which represents the future – is very simple – Peace needs Partnership. Let that be what guides us through the next period. Let that be the principle which underpins our political engagement going forward. Let that be the road map to a future built upon genuine reconciliation and progress.

I was once in the IRA. I am now a peace builder. I don't expect anyone to take me at my word. I expect them to take me by my deeds. I have spent 20 years building the peace. But peace building like conflict is a joint enterprise. I challenge all of the parties to the conflict to pledge their commitment to the type of acknowledgement, respect and compromise we need to move forward in the years ahead.