

It is a pleasure to be here and I would like to thank the University of Liverpool and the Institute of Irish Studies for the invitation and in particular Professor Peter Shirlow and his team for making tonight possible.

It is often said that the first casualty of war is the truth.

That is the received wisdom. In reality there is a multiplicity of truths, lived experiences and narratives of conflict.

For my part I believe that the first casualty of conflict is in fact our common humanity.

Conflict and the drivers of conflict; injustice, repression and exclusion take root when our common humanity, our civility and our compassion for others is lost.

After decades of conflict and segregation, our challenge is to rekindle our shared humanity.

Peace must be more than the absence of conflict.

Peace building is not a one-off event - it is a process to deal with the past and to plan for the future.

I have met with victims of State violence, victims of Republican violence and victims of Unionist violence; widows and widowers; parents who lost children and children who lost parents.

These have been some of the hardest conversations I have ever had.

They have also been some of the most inspiring.

They have been marked by grace and respect.

Survivors of the conflict seek truth and justice, acknowledgment and support. We must understand that this is their due.

No survivor should be asked to either forgive or to forget -
that is not a demand to place on anyone.

I believe it is my duty - and the duty of all political leaders - to
both listen to and engage with all in society. By definition
these are uncomfortable but necessary conversations.

It means reaching beyond those who agree with us and ex-
tending a hand to all.

For me, that means meeting with those hurt and bereaved by
Republicans.

There are some who use the past to abdicate responsibility
to lead in the present - those who want to refight old battles,
to demand repentance, victory and surrender.

That is not peacebuilding, and such actions can only perpetu-
ate division and separation.

We cannot ignore the past.

We cannot wish it away.

Wrongs that have been done cannot be undone.

The dead cannot be brought back and the injured made whole.

We must all face up to the past as a society.

This is not just an issue solely for the north, but for all of Ireland, and Britain.

I believe that we must recast our approach to the past.

It cannot be about legitimising or delegitimising deeds, or groups, or outlooks, but about accepting and acknowledging our collective history.

We must approach it in the context of remembering; approach it with respect and with reconciliation in mind.

Acknowledging the past does not diminish anyone in any way.

In fact it demonstrates real leadership and opens up new conversations.

When the British Queen visited Dublin she laid a wreath at the Garden of Remembrance for all who had died for Irish Freedom.

That day 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.”

We cannot just acknowledge our own experiences.

We must acknowledge the experiences of others.

We must recognise the devastating impact of the conflict on everyone - from all backgrounds.

There can be no hierarchy of victims and loss.

One mother's loss is no different from another's.

'They were all some mother's son.'

All of us in this room are equals, entitled to equal respect and equal rights. But we all have different views and experiences.

All survivors and victims of the conflict carry their own memories and stories.

They are unified by loss and injury. A loss and injury felt equally regardless of circumstance.

Let us acknowledge suffering and respect all.

The debate on the past cannot and should not be reduced to whataboutery or who started the conflict in an attempt to

apportion blame. It is not a zero-sum game. It is more important than political point scoring.

My starting point is to be thankful that the conflict is over.

That we have an agreement and peace.

But we need more. We need a new conversation about the past.

A focus on finding common ground and a compassionate approach to the past.

All suffering is real and sincere.

Suffering is felt in homes across Ireland and Britain.

No one has a monopoly on suffering.

I have stood with the families of the Republican dead.

In my own city each year I stand with families bereaved when 33 people and an unborn child were killed in co-ordinated

*bomb attacks in Dublin and Monaghan - the largest loss of
life in the conflict.*

*The pain and loss of relatives of British soldiers killed is no dif-
ferent and no less felt.*

Not far from here is Warrington.

*The pain suffered by the parents of twelve year old Tim Parry
and three year old Jonathan Ball is unimaginable - no parent
should ever be left to bury a child.*

I cannot undo that damage or that loss.

*But what can do is ensure that I and my generation of Repub-
licans will work tirelessly to build a society in which no other
parent is left without a child or a child left without a mammy
or daddy due to conflict.*

I pledge to work to promote peace and reconciliation, to
acknowledge all suffering and provide a space to remember.

In her poem 'why some people be mad at me sometimes', African-American poet and activist Lucile Clifton simply wrote.

'they ask me to remember... but they want me to remember
their memories... and I keep remembering mine.'

The right to remember the dead was enshrined in the Good
Friday Agreement.

Yet acts of remembrance remain contested.

I attended a commemoration to IRA Volunteers.

I stood with mothers and families at a dignified ceremony.

That caused a backlash from some.

These families, like every other, has the right to remember
and that right should be respected.

The previous year I attended the remembrance ceremony

held by the Royal British Legion in Dublin. I was pleased to be

invited and stood in solemn remembrance

Everyone has the right to remember in a dignified matter.

The British Army have particular traditions.

The Republican tradition stems from a time of epic laments

and the graveside oration to honour the dead.

It is about honouring the dead, not celebrating conflict.

In 2013 Martin McGuinness, in a speech in the Warrington

Peace Centre made clear, 'The glorification of conflict is the

antithesis of peace building'.

I am a peacebuilder in the tradition of my friend Martin.

Sinn Féin in our policy 'Towards an Agreed and Reconciled

Future' supported the designation of a Reconciliation Day.

A day during which we can all remember the past and commit to reconciliation and healing.

A day to acknowledge the suffering of all.

That approach I believe can be a difficult, but essential step.

It is not beyond any of us to respect the loss of another and assert our common humanity and our compassion over all else.

Two weeks ago, I spoke at the inauguration of the new Sinn Féin Mayor of Belfast in Belfast City Hall.

I reminded those present that the City Hall was built before partition - a time when the Ulster and the Irish identity was as one.

The Mayor's chain is engraved with the legend 'Erin go Bragh'

(Ireland Forever), and had been worn by a succession of Unionist Mayors.

Since then much has changed.

We had the partition of the country.

The establishment of two conservative states.

Decades of conflict and now over twenty years of peace.

We have agreements rooted in equality, parity of esteem and power sharing.

The old conservative state in the south is gone - swept aside by the marriage equality and repeal the eighth referendums.

Pride is now the largest political demonstration in Belfast.

When the result of the repeal referendum was announced in Dublin Castle, from the crowd a sign was lifted in the air that simply said, 'the North is Next.

In the north the perpetual unionist majority - the very basis of the northern State is gone.

We face into Brexit and the possible imposition of a hard border against the will of the people of the North.

The nationalist vote is growing.

Modernity beckons and change is all around.

And that is the thing with politics - as with life - change happens.

The challenge we face is to manage that change.

For that is where the past and future can collide.

And that is why reconciliation is so important.

Reconciliation will build resilience into society as we face the challenges and changes of the future.

Just as we approach the past through the prism of reconciliation we must also plan for the future in terms of reconciliation.

It is about building a future together.

I am a united Irishman.

The united Ireland I want is not simply bolting the north onto the south.

It is about building a new and united Ireland.

A reconciled Ireland.

A new Ireland that is a home to all people who share the island.

An Ireland where it is possible to be British, Irish, both or neither.

Sinn Féin is committed to safeguarding the rights enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, including the commitment to parity of esteem and citizenship.

There can be no diminution of rights or respect in the united Ireland that is emerging.

There will be a unity referendum and our job is to build the biggest possible majority for it.

To build and demonstrate a vision of a united Ireland for all.

There are others who value the union; I want to hear from them.

To listen to their concerns and their case for continued partition.

The debate on the future must be respectful and must be informed.

If the people choose unity, then the British government is obliged to legislate for it.

It was alarming too when Theresa May in the Brexit debate states that no British Prime Minister would consider changes to the union.

That ship sailed in 1998.

The truth is that since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the British government is obliged to act on the vote of the people in a unity referendum.

Following a successful unity referendum there will need to be a period of transition and agreement.

That is when the new Ireland will be given structure.

When we put in place the essential elements of a new Ireland based on rights and respect.

As part of that we will need to define a new relationship with Britain.

There are those in the North who are proud to be British citizens.

They will remain British citizens in a new and united Ireland.

Their citizenship must be respected and given effect in a new and united Ireland.

One of the areas of common agreement with the Brexiteers, the Irish government and the EU is that the common travel area must and will continue regardless of Brexit.

That means the ability to travel and work between our countries will continue.

Look at this city and the role of the Irish community over centuries.

We share bonds of friendship, kinship and history.

Those bonds cannot and must not be broken.

A new and united Ireland would be the opportunity to transcend our history and meet as equal nations.

I want to live in a reconciled and united Ireland.

Sinn Féin is determined to build reconciliation and unity.

There is no doubt that the current British government's dependence on the DUP makes this a mighty challenge.

But a new conversation has started, north and south.

That is now under way.

Change is coming.

The deal between the DUP and Tories will be a footnote in our shared histories. With Brexit as its only legacy.

Change is coming and remembering, respect and reconciliation are key as we build a future together.

It is a process in which all political leaders - including Unionists and British Prime Ministers - must engage.

It is a process in which they will find Sinn Féin as willing and generous partners.

For that is the least we owe to all those who have suffered and endured loss.

That is the least we can do that for all who look to the future with expectation and hope.

Thank you.