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<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>The British government and the peace process; Response to the secretary of state</th>
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THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT AND THE PEACE PROCESS
John Reid, MP

IBIS working paper no. 14
THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT AND
THE PEACE PROCESS

John Reid, MP

RESPONSE TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE

Noel Dorr

No. 3 in the lecture series “Institution building and the peace process: the challenge of implementation” organised in association with the Conference of University Rectors in Ireland

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THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT AND THE PEACE PROCESS

One of the lessons to be drawn from the history of Northern Ireland is the need for unionists to be involved in the peace process: unionist opponents of the agreement, however sincere, are only undermining the long term interests of unionism. Even those who oppose the administration are governed by it, and it would be a needless tragedy if a disaffected nationalist community was replaced by a disaffected unionist community. The Catholic community once felt disaffected, but the civil rights movement gave it a more assertive voice. The civil unrest of these early years culminated in the Sunningdale agreement of 1973, which anticipated several of the key provisions of the 1998 settlement; but this agreement collapsed in the face of unionist opposition. An improved British-Irish relationship in the 1980s and 1990s permitted two fundamental principles to gain widespread acceptance: those of consent, and of the equal validity of nationalist and unionist aspirations. The Good Friday agreement, representative of a wide range of parties and interests, incorporated these principles and provided a detailed blueprint for the future. Major strides towards its full implementation have already been undertaken, and, while the agreement might not have provided a final solution, it has provided a framework within which the people of Northern Ireland can themselves arrive at an accommodation.

Publication information
This contains the text of a lecture presented as part of the seminar series “Institution building and the peace process: the challenge of implementation”, organised jointly by the Conference of University Rectors in Ireland and the Institute for British-Irish Studies. The lecture was presented in UCD on 8 November 2001. This document also contains an edited version of the response to the lecture.
Dr John Reid, MP, is Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He was born in 1947 and graduated from Stirling University, where he gained an honours degree in history and a PhD in economic history. Before his election to parliament in 1987, he served as research officer for the Labour Party, as a political adviser to party leader Neil Kinnock (1983-85) and as Scottish organiser of Trade Unionists for Labour. He served on the Labour Party front bench from 1990 to 1997, and since then has served as Armed Forces Minister (1997-98), Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (1998-99) and Secretary of State for Scotland (1999-2001). He was appointed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 24 January 2001.

Noel Dorr is chairman of the Institute for British-Irish Studies. A graduate of the National University of Ireland (Galway) and of Georgetown University, he served for many years in the Irish foreign service. He was Irish Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York (1980-83), and acted as Irish representative on the Security Council and chair of the Security Council in 1981-82. He subsequently served as Irish ambassador in London (1983-87) and as Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs (1987-95). Since then he has served as Irish representative in the negotiation of the Amsterdam and Nice treaties.
Like anyone in a controversial profession, every Secretary of State for Northern Ireland should preface everything they say with a disclaimer. As I thought about how to address the British government’s role in Northern Ireland it occurred to me that the same man, Abraham Lincoln, who sought to entrench “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” in the United States wrote, only a few months later “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.”

So my disclaimer is this. Northern Ireland is an object lesson in the art of the possible. It is evidence of the redeeming power of politics and its ability to lay a bloody and brutal past to rest. But in spite of the enormous achievements of the past few years, today’s settlement is still very much work in progress. For each hurdle cleared, another appears. And the greater the progress, the more we must call upon Northern Ireland’s political leaders to negotiate, to compromise, to stretch still further.

As David Ford will testify, no-one is immune from these demands. Last week the Alliance Party faced a tough political choice. I understand their difficulty in designating as unionist when their values do not fit the traditional categories. So I appreciate all the more their willingness not to stand on their principles—they might just have saved the Good Friday Agreement.

David Trimble, too, can hardly have imagined the process that would see him re-elected as First Minister, nor the sight of grown men brawling that greeted his victory. Tuesday’s ugly scenes made me think. The real divide in Northern Ireland politics is not Protestant versus Catholic or nationalist against unionist. It is between those on the one hand who use power to serve the people, to effect positive change, and on the other those who abuse power to undermine progress, to sow dissent, to send Northern Ireland back to the dark ages of conflict and alienation, and who cling to the gun and the bomb. I can put it no better than Mark Durkan: it is the difference between good government and bad politics.

I will talk later about the distance that the British government has come both in its relations with the Irish government and its understanding of nationalism. But first I want to reflect for a minute on the position of unionism today. Of course, unionism cannot be taken for granted in this process. We cannot ignore the sincerely-held views of the deeply sceptical wing of unionism. It is a lot to ask, to set aside decades of mistrust, fuelled by terrible violence on both sides.

But we have to convince sceptical unionists that it is in their own self interest to participate in this process. The unionist “no” brigade, however sincere, are only undermining the long term interests of unionism. Even sceptics must engage in the
project if they are to be able to influence and take control of their future. Even those who oppose the administration are governed by it.

These unionists who look only backward do unionism no service, because their path is the path of powerlessness. Standing on the sidelines, shouting at the players on the park, might be a good way to vent frustrations but it does nothing to influence the outcome of the match. A brawl on the television might make a spectacle for the TV cameras, but it rarely alters the score. To do that we have to be involved.

It would be a tragedy—and a needless tragedy—if a disaffected nationalist community was replaced by a disaffected unionist community. Modern unionism, however, has shown that it is tolerant, inclusive and progressive. It is indispensable to this process and crucial to the health of Northern Ireland’s fledgling government. And it is influential.

Quite simply, without the recent efforts of this modern unionism there would be no Agreement, no Assembly and no hope of a better future for Northern Ireland. We would not have seen the recent progress on the arms issue. And neither would there have been acceptance of the principle of consent, or the removal of the Republic’s territorial claim to the North. In reality, it is precisely those in unionism who have engaged constructively who have contributed most to the unionist cause, as well as most to the peace process.

So I can say to everyone here in Ireland, the engagement of unionism is essential to the future success of the Good Friday Agreement. And I can say with equal sincerity that unionist engagement in the Good Friday Agreement is essential to the future success of unionism.

Essential to that process, of course, are the institutions in Northern Ireland, allowing politicians from Northern Ireland to address problems arising in Northern Ireland. Last week, the election of Trimble and Durkan as First and Deputy First Ministers cleared the way for a period of stable government in Northern Ireland. This provides time to implement the ambitious programme for government, to build an even-stronger economy, and to deliver ever-better public services—in health, education, transport. It provides time for all sides to shoulder responsibility. To serve, in partnership, the people who put them there. But there is still a long way to go, and Northern Ireland does nothing if not throw up surprises. As we continue our efforts to keep the political process on track, it is hard not to think how much Northern Ireland’s history is made up of outside influences, lost opportunities and near misses. And this is no theoretical exercise: when politics fails, even bloodier violence takes its place.

So today, as we look at the role of successive British governments in Northern Ireland we have to keep in mind the accidents of timing, and the luck, good and bad, that has shaped events almost as much as our meticulously laid plans. And I want particularly to concentrate on what have we learned along the way—why, to borrow
from Seamus Mallon, we are learning to live with our history, not become enslaved to it.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of huge flux in Northern Ireland. The civil rights movement gave Catholics a more assertive voice and articulated their disaffection. Elections to the devolved government produced an inbuilt unionist majority. The nationalist community felt, often with good reason, both alienated and disadvantaged. The contrast between their improving education as a result of the post-war extension of the welfare state, and discrimination against them in political, employment and housing areas was keenly felt. Inspired by the US civil rights movement, a similar movement emerged in Northern Ireland.

Ironically, the rise of the civil rights movement confirmed radicals on both sides in their deepest fears and prejudices. For many nationalists, the negative reaction to their demands for equal treatment confirmed their belief that Northern Ireland was unreformable. On the other side, many loyalists saw the civil rights movement as a Trojan horse, with the civil rights demand being used as a pretext for an uprising against the state that some nationalists had refused to recognise. The rapid descent into civil unrest, and the involvement of prominent republicans in the civil rights movement only confirmed these fears.

The British and Northern Ireland governments recognised that the police could not cope, in particular with the serious inter-communal violence that had spread throughout Northern Ireland. The British government agreed to the deployment of the Army in support of the civil authorities. Responsibility for law and order remained with the local devolved administration until it was prorogued in 1972 in the face of an ever-worsening security situation. In that year alone—1972—470 people were killed, including 105 soldiers. And as the situation deteriorated the government became convinced that a straightforward security solution could not work.

Against this backdrop, the 1973 Sunningdale agreement was the best deal possible at the time. Indeed much of what was agreed late in 1973 was reflected in the settlement of May 1998:

- an executive made up of unionist and nationalist politicians
- a North-South dimension
- no change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the consent of a majority of the people living there.

But it fell well short of the full spectrum of political opinion and it did not include dissenters. Indeed, the DUP were not even invited to the negotiations from which it
emerged. The assembly that it created was fatally unbalanced and, in the face of widespread unionist opposition, it collapsed.

Perhaps one of the most crucial lessons was the importance of acting in concert with the Irish government. The 1973 accord acknowledged the importance of the "Irish dimension" and took some limited steps—notably the setting up of a Council of Ireland—to strengthening Irish involvement in Northern Ireland.

The Anglo-Irish summit of 1981 went a good deal further and was an important platform for the Good Friday Agreement almost 17 years later. It addressed the social context of the conflict and it recognised that the British government could only tackle that conflict in close co-operation with the Irish. Twenty years ago this week Margaret Thatcher met Garrett FitzGeral and issued a communiqué which agreed the need for efforts to lessen the divisions between the two sections of the community in Northern Ireland and reconcile the two major traditions in the two parts of Ireland.

And it went further. Officials from both countries reported to the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach on possible new institutional structures, citizenship rights, economic cooperation and measures to encourage mutual understanding. Officials analysed the reasons for misconceptions in each country about public opinion and government policies in the other, and considered measures that the two governments might take, jointly or separately, to remove such misconceptions and improve mutual understanding. The totality of relations between and throughout these islands was opened for discussion. Those were very tentative steps but ones which Garrett FitzGerald said at the time were forging a new relationship.

Both governments clearly set out their views and aspirations for the future of Northern Ireland. The Taoiseach affirmed that it was the wish of the Irish government and, he believed, of the great majority of the people of the island of Ireland, to secure the unity of Ireland by agreement and in peace. The Prime Minister asserted, and the Taoiseach agreed, that any change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would require the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. She made it clear that if that consent were forthcoming the British government would accept it.

It seems hard to imagine now, but these early tentative steps forward by the two governments were pilloried as the high road to Irish unity. It is hard to imagine because these twin principles—the principle of consent and the equal validity of nationalist and unionist aspirations—are at the very heart of the Good Friday Agreement. We now take it for granted that a solution will only stick if it commands widespread support across the communities in Northern Ireland.

The 1981 summit was a signpost moment; the Anglo-Irish Agreement a decisive one. Despite all the controversy which it provoked at the time among unionists, there is no doubt that the Hillsborough Agreement was crucial in establishing some of the realities which would have to be faced in an eventual, all-embracing deal. In
Reid / British government policy

that sense it can be said to have paved the way for talks between the four main parties in Northern Ireland in 1991 and 1992. For the first time the parties were talking about relationships within the island of Ireland. For the first time even the DUP were prepared to sit down at the same table as an Irish government—though travelling to Dublin was a bridge too far.

There was no immediate breakthrough. But in December 1993 came the Downing Street declaration and the government’s most explicit statement yet on the right to self-determination of the Irish people. The two governments renewed their commitment to an urgent resolution of Northern Ireland’s conflict. Eight months later, PIRA announced a “complete cessation of military activities”. While full negotiations were still a long way off, the cease-fires gave enough space for politics to put down tentative roots.

Of course there is a million miles between exploratory talks and a multi-party settlement. But the tectonics were changing. Old certainties and dogmas were being swept away and a new basis for progress was emerging. The 30 years of the Troubles stemmed from generations of territorial and constitutional strife, and a very real feeling that one side had been denied equality of treatment. So Northern Ireland’s conflict had to be resolved on two fronts: a constitutional settlement underpinned by real, palpable equality.

THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

The Good Friday Agreement was hammered out by political parties of all sizes and all beliefs. Some chose not to contribute, but none can say that they were not given the chance. And the Executive that it conceived is truly representative. It recognises that everyone who has been a party to the conflict must be a party to its resolution. It recognises that nationalists and republicans have, historically, felt alienated from the state. And that will only change if we change the very structure of the state.

The Good Friday Agreement gave nationalists and republicans an equal stake in the government of Northern Ireland and an equal status in the eyes of that government. It gave all sides of the political debate institutions in which they would all place their trust. There are even two ministerial portfolios for the DUP despite their opposition to the entire process. And I welcome their contribution—as ministers if not party politicians—because we can only achieve political stability if all sides can claim some ownership of the government that serves them.

As I have already mentioned, the 1973 accord acknowledged the importance of the “Irish dimension”. Now, we no longer think in terms of an “Irish dimension”, to be tacked on to internal Northern Ireland policies. The Irish government and the Irish people have played a crucial role in bringing the peace process this far. We have a shared interest in a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland. And, when needs
be, our two governments will continue to act together in the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland.

But the Good Friday Agreement sends ripples far beyond the shores and borders of Northern Ireland. For it has created a whole new network of institutional links throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland. Gone is the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In its place we have a framework for enhanced practical co-operation across these islands. This is a framework that allows us to share what we have in common but respects what makes us different—a framework that disperses the rewards of peace throughout the regions.

It has given us a new Human Rights Commission and an Equality Commission to give Northern Ireland the sort of rights-based society that other countries will look to as a model of excellence.

We have taken substantial steps towards normalising Northern Ireland’s security. Since 1995, 33 army bases have closed, plus 10 owned jointly with police. There are currently less than 13,500 troops in the province, the lowest level since 1970. This compares with a peak of 30,000 in 1972. And since the Good Friday Agreement, routine military patrolling has been reduced by over 50%.

We are renewing the criminal justice system and I plan to publish a draft bill and implementation plan next week.

We have made huge strides to change forever the way that Northern Ireland is policed. Northern Ireland is a divided society and the issue of policing throws those divides into sharp relief. In order to be fully effective, a police service must be representative of the community it serves. That is why radical changes were needed to redress the extreme religious imbalance which means that there is only one Catholic for every nine Protestants in the service—to equip the police to meet the challenges of peace with the same courage and determination that distinguished them in times of conflict.

These changes have come at a cost. Policing in Northern Ireland arouses greater passions than almost anywhere else in the world. I have heard—often at first hand—the anger and fear that plans to reform the police have aroused. And I understand the pain that changes to the name have caused—particularly amongst the family, friends and colleagues of murdered and injured officers.

But the world, and Northern Ireland, is changing. Since last Sunday we must learn to speak of the Police Service of Northern Ireland rather than the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Our task now is to prepare and equip the PSNI to deliver an effective policing service to all the people of Northern Ireland. I am committed to providing the resources they need.

By far the most striking illustration of just how far we have come is the statement of the Decommissioning Body on 23 October that the IRA had put a quantity of weap-
ony beyond use. To borrow a much-overused term, this was a genuinely historic move, which profoundly enhances the prospects for peace in Northern Ireland.

The move changed the security situation enough to allow us to start dismantling the towers at Sturgan Mountain and Camlough on 24 October and at the supersangar at Newtownhamilton and the base at Magherafelt on 25 October. The supersangar has now been removed. And, depending on the threat, we want to do more. For example, in the long term, the army anticipates a reduction from the present troop levels of 13,500 to a normal peace-time garrison of around 8,000 full-time soldiers and 20 bases.

To hear this litany of achievements, you could be forgiven for wondering why the path towards full implementation of the Agreement has been so rocky and why we have seemed, at times, to be hanging on by our fingernails. The answer is trust. Here I must return to my disclaimer. There is a great deal that a government can do to build trust. We can legislate to safeguard human rights and advance equality. We can encourage, cajole and bully politicians to work together. But we cannot impose trust by diktat. It has to be built, painstakingly, from the bottom up, by Northern Ireland’s politicians—proving their willingness to work together, proving their commitment to this process.

After 30 years of brutal strife that tore communities apart and set neighbour against neighbour, the Good Friday Agreement asked both sides to overcome their fear and hatred and trust each other to act in everyone’s best interests. If we had asked the same thing 10 years ago we would have been dismissed as delusional. But, as George Mitchell recognised in relation to his own review, slowly, almost imperceptibly, trust crept in.

In the early days of this process even the smallest gesture was a huge milestone. For some, even sitting in the same room was a monumental compromise. And this was only a few short years ago. For the change since then, we are indebted to a small band of extraordinary politicians.

I believe that David Trimble has achieved more for unionists than any other unionist leader in living memory. He has acted with consistent bravery and foresight to keep the executive in business, not just for unionists but for all the people of Northern Ireland. He has overcome opposition on several fronts—most bruising from the ranks of his own party—to develop constructive, inclusive working relationships with nationalist politicians. He has made the transition from politician to statesman.

I recognise too the distance that Gerry Adams has travelled. He has argued consistently that the differences between unionist and nationalist, loyalist and republican can only be resolved by inclusive political dialogue and shared responsibility. Without them, and countless other tireless politicians in the SDLP, the Women’s Coalition, the Alliance, the PUP and UDP, we would not be where we are today.
But the closer we get towards our ultimate goal, the bigger the demands on either side. Unionists have more than once entered government on the understanding that republicans would reciprocate with some move on arms. When that move came it was equally brave—and equally decisive.

We have seen that trust stretched to the limit—and once or twice beyond. As this week illustrates so vividly, we all still have much work to do. Both sides must build on what they have given to the process so far. Unionists must show their commitment to the smooth and effective operation of all the institutions. All parts of the community need to feel that paramilitarism will not be allowed to blight the political landscape.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

While political violence in Northern Ireland was always confined to a relatively small minority, it has shaped fundamentally beliefs and behaviour on both sides of the community. Its legacy remains: Northern Ireland society is highly segregated, and there is a close identification of religious and political affiliation—there is an assumption, largely but not wholly accurate, that Protestants are unionist and Catholics are nationalist.

Of course it is in everybody’s interest to move on. Nobody wants the process to lurch from crisis to crisis. Nobody wants to be left wondering who will be governing Northern Ireland next week or the week after. But this is a long revolution. This was not a normal society and it did not have a normal political culture. The almost-daily violence inflicted on individuals and communities—the obscene sight of terrified school children—reminds us just how far we still have to travel.

I have said many harsh things about loyalists over recent weeks and I do not apologise for that. What we do need to understand, though, if we want to tackle the problem at root, is that there is a deep sense of unease in many loyalist communities as they sense the tide of events moving against them.

Just as unionists have been urged to understand the historic compromises made by republicans over the past few years, so we must understand that there are genuine problems within unionism and loyalism. It’s real, and it hurts.

We have long recognised that political progress is the key to a peaceful future for Northern Ireland. The deep roots of this conflict—social and political exclusion and different constitutional aspirations—meant that it could be resolved within the framework of an inclusive political settlement. It is our duty to facilitate the transition from conflict and dogma to achievable political aspirations, peacefully and democratically expressed. In short, our business is empowering the people of Northern Ireland to govern themselves.
On Tuesday, another landmark was reached. For the first time since the Agreement was reached over 3½ years ago the institutions which it created—the Assembly, the Executive, the North South Ministerial Council, the British Irish Council—can move forward confidently and with a real expectation of stability.

Now that a First and Deputy First Minister have been elected, and there is every prospect of continuing stable institutions, I see no reason for the next Assembly elections to be any earlier than 1 May 2003, the date which has already been set by Parliament in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I am continuing with preparations for the review which I announced on Saturday, to consider concerns which have been raised about the operation of the Strand 1 arrangements. I will be meeting the parties in the coming days, and expect the review to commence on 19 November.

I do not delude myself that we have solved the conundrum of Northern Ireland. But we are doing the next best thing: enabling the people of Northern Ireland to answer it for themselves.
In the past, when we talked about the relationship between our two islands, we tended to speak of “Anglo-Irish relations”. I should like to assure our distinguished Scottish speaker, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Dr John Reid, that the term has been “re-designated”—a word with which he has become familiar recently. It is now “British-Irish relations”; and it is in my capacity as Chairman of the Board of the Institute for British-Irish Studies that I welcome him here this evening and thank him warmly for the address he has just given us.

When I served in the Irish Embassy in London many years ago I had occasion from time to time to speak to various groups—politicians, journalists, and so on. I developed a ploy which helped to disarm them when I started to speak. I imagined two characters who appeared continually over the centuries on either side of the Irish Seas. One was “the exasperated Englishman” who believed that all the troubles of this island were due to the fact that the Irish are incurably quarrelsome. The other was “the exasperated Irishman”: he believed that the trouble occurred because the English were insufferably meddlesome.

But in all of this I forgot about the Scots. They appear continually throughout our history at a tangent to what we too often see as the straightforward polarity of the Anglo-Irish relationship. Consider the history.

Start with St Patrick—the first identifiable individual voice to speak to us out of the swirling mists of Irish pre-history. He was a native of Roman Britain—possibly born in Dumbarton in Scotland. About the same time Palladius was sent to Ireland by Pope Celestine in 432 as a missionary ad Scottos in Christum credentes—Scoti or Scots being the name by which the Irish were known at the time. Later there was Columcille, whom you call Columba, the great saint who left Ulster for Iona and the Dal Riada settlements linking Ulster with Argyll across the Sea of Moyle.

In the fourteenth century we find the strange figure of Edward, brother of Scotland’s Robert the Bruce, whose incursion down the east coast of Ireland left us in our history unsure whether to think of him as an invader or as the King of Ireland who might have been. In the sixteenth century the Irish chieftains in their wars relied on Scottish mercenaries, the “Gallowglasses”. Scottish settlers were prominent in the seventeenth century Plantations in Ulster; and again Scottish forces fought in the wars of the 1640s which also saw armies of royalists, parliamentarians, Old Irish and Old English forces in confused and changing contention in Ireland. For a good part of the eighteenth century much of Irish national feeling and emotion focused on the Stuart Pretenders and on Bonnie Prince Charlie while in America, Irish settlers from Ulster, of a different religious outlook, came to be called “Scotch-Irish”.

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IBIS WORKING PAPER NO. 14
And today? I suppose I had better pass over in silence what Scotland did to Ireland some months ago at Murrayfield—a defeat which spoiled for Ireland what might otherwise have been our most successful international rugby season of recent times.

As if all this were not enough, we now have here with us a patient, knowledgeable, soft-spoken Scot—the first Scottish Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Again it is confusing to any of us who in the past tended to see a simple polarity in what we called Anglo-Irish relations. We should welcome him all the more for that. Incidentally as I welcome him I want to say that it is not true that he, who has been a long-time supporter of Glasgow Celtic, recently “re-designated” himself as a Rangers supporter in order to show that he is balanced in his approach to the problems he faces in Northern Ireland!

Dr Reid has given us an interesting—and I think quite an important—address here this evening and I should like to thank him warmly on your behalf. As a historian, he devoted a good part of his speech to the history of the past 30 years in Northern Ireland and the various efforts to resolve the conflict there. In responding to him I should like to join him in looking back over that period. I was personally involved in many of the events he mentioned—although I cannot claim to have had a major role. I was what is sometimes called a “humble spear-carrier” but in this context, in an era of de-commissioning I had better say I was a “humble brief-case carrier”!

I propose to look back over this period of involvement, not because I want to reminisce, but because I think it is helpful in face of the ups and downs of this year to look to a longer perspective. Like the Secretary of State I want to draw attention to how far we have come already in this island, and in relations between these islands, over the past 30 years. I think that kind of longer view may give much-needed encouragement and hope to those who are now engaged in making the institutions of the Belfast Agreement work.

I start by remembering the hopes raised in the 1960s by meetings between the Taoiseach and the Northern Ireland Prime Minister. I am reminded of this because I see here in the hall tonight Dr Ken Whitaker—someone who was deeply involved in arranging those meetings between Terence O’Neill and, first, Sean Lemass and, later, his successor, Jack Lynch.

The hope that this thaw in the cold relations between North and South would lead gradually to a new era in Northern Ireland faded towards the end of the 1960s when the present troubles began. At that time, the community tensions built into Northern Ireland from the outset erupted openly as nationalists began forcefully to demand their full civil rights.

The first reactions of the governments in both Dublin and London as we see now were quite out of line with the realities of Northern Ireland. London took the view that the old “Irish question” had been settled definitively in 1920-21: the Republic as a “foreign country” should therefore have no role in relation to Northern Ireland.
Dublin on the other hand was also taken aback by what was happening: it argued that it was all due to partition. I recall being in New York in 1969 when the new Irish Minister for External Affairs, Dr Hillery, went to seek a UN peacekeeping force.

In the early 1970s, the violence grew and spiralled steadily upwards. There were the awful events of Bloody Sunday and, following that, the burning of the British Embassy in Dublin. In the present very warm atmosphere in our relations we must not simply gloss over those darker times. I myself, as a passer-by, saw the British Embassy ablaze that evening in Dublin in 1972. Later, in the mid-1970s, I met Christopher Ewart Biggs, the new Ambassador, who called on me and on other senior officials of the Department of Foreign Affairs shortly after his arrival. Some days later he was murdered in an appalling atrocity. But I also have warm memories of later years in London, when I knew and became a friend of his widow, Jane Ewart-Biggs, a gracious lady who showed no bitterness about her loss but committed herself to working for better relations between the two islands.

By 1973, both governments had come to a better understanding of the realities of Northern Ireland. They had begun to see it as a legacy left by history to all of us in these islands—an unsolved residue of the complex interaction between our peoples over many centuries. By then Stormont had been abolished, and the British government was considering what might replace it. The British Green Paper of 1972 accepted that the majority rule system of government, though suited to Westminster, was not well-suited to Northern Ireland with its deep community divisions. That Green Paper also, for the first time in 50 years, recognised that an “Irish Dimension” is intrinsic to Northern Ireland and that it must be given some kind of structured expression.

By then, Dublin too was coming to accept realities—including the reality that, if there were ever to be a united Ireland it could come about only with the consent of a majority of the population in Northern Ireland.

Following the election of an Assembly in Northern Ireland, the two prime ministers and a number of their respective ministers, together with the main Northern Ireland parties, all except the DUP, met at Sunningdale. Those present represented the centre in Northern Ireland—at that time violence still continued and it was not then possible to bring in the extremes. After four days of negotiation they hammered out the Sunningdale Agreement—the most hopeful effort until then to resolve the problem.

The agreement they reached rested on declarations by both governments establishing the need for consent of a majority as a necessary condition for any possible future change in the status of Northern Ireland. Dublin accepted this principle but regrettably there were still differences of principle which made it impossible to agree on a single text: it was necessary instead for each government to set out its position in parallel declarations in the final communiqué. The agreement also provided for devolution of substantial powers to a power-sharing executive responsible
to an elected assembly in Northern Ireland; and it set up a structured link between North and South by way of a Council of Ireland.

I was a junior member of the official delegation which accompanied the Taoiseach and Irish ministers to Sunningdale and I have vivid memories of that time. I remember the hope with which the outcome was greeted, as elected representatives of the two communities committed themselves to working together in Northern Ireland. Perhaps I can even admit that I had a hand in the statement made by the Taoiseach to the final press conference after the Agreement was signed. I recall that it opened with the phrase “there are no winners and no losers here today at Sunningdale”.

Sadly, Sunningdale proved a bridge too far for its time. Within six months the executive fell and the agreement collapsed—for a variety of reasons which I will not dwell on here. But I believe that some of the building blocks put in place at that time helped much later to build the Belfast Agreement of 1998.

I recall another time of hope in 1980. I was part of the delegation of officials who accompanied the then Taoiseach, Mr Haughey, when he met Prime Minister Thatcher for the first time in May 1980 in Downing St, and I remember the new concept to which that, and a further meeting at the end of that year gave rise. This was “the totality of relationships”—a phrase which encapsulated the idea that the development of a good and more structured relationship between Dublin and London would help to set a context in which the rigidities of the divisions in Northern Ireland might be softened and the problem more easily resolved. That, too, was an element, and an important one, in the Belfast Agreement of 1998.

In the early to mid-1980s I was attached to the Irish Embassy in London. Two particular memories from that period stand out in my mind. One was the intensive negotiation between officials from Dublin and London, under the direction of ministers and of the two prime ministers, which led to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985. Each side represented the position of its government with integrity but both worked together to try to reach agreement on structures which would help towards a solution. I am glad to be able to say that for some of us friendships still endure from that time. The other memory is a darker and more sombre one. It is a memory of what violence meant at a human level. After the bomb at Harrods and again after the Brighton bomb in 1984, I visited hospitals to meet those who had been terribly injured by those bombs. I tried in this way to show that the great majority of people in Ireland identified with them, as victims, rather than with those who had planted the bombs which had maimed them.

That Agreement of 1985 set up a structure through which the Irish government, speaking as a surrogate voice on behalf of the minority, would have a right to make a regular input into the British government’s direct rule of Northern Ireland, so long as it continued. It also, however, offered an incentive for devolution: if agreement based on a sharing of power could be worked out in Northern Ireland then Dublin’s role and input would be withdrawn from any area where power had been devolved.
We had great hopes for the agreement at the time. It did succeed well in one of its aims—it provided a continuing and structured way of resolving difficulties and tensions between the two governments over Northern Ireland. Regrettably, however, it was less successful in its other main aim—the resolution of conflict between the communities within Northern Ireland. The unionist community opposed it strongly and remained opposed.

The agreement had other effects over time—on both sides of the community divide in Northern Ireland. It may not be too much to say that within the context which it set, the republican movement gradually became persuaded of the need and the possibility of turning away from violence towards a political approach; while unionist parties, who had opposed the agreement vigorously, now had a real incentive to negotiate a new agreement to replace it.

It took time and much effort—some public and some private and secret—to get to that further stage. I recall accompanying Irish ministers to inter-party negotiations in Stormont in the early 1990s. Since extremist violence was still continuing these negotiations could not yet be inclusive and, in retrospect, they could be seen as premature. The time was not yet ripe. But these discussions, however acerbic at times, brought parties from Northern Ireland into discussion with Irish ministers under the chairmanship of the Secretary of State. They too helped in their way to prepare the ground for later negotiations not least in firmly establishing the idea that any settlement must deal with issues arising in three “strands”: within Northern Ireland, between North and South in the island of Ireland, and between the two islands.

Later, I remember being there when the Downing Street Declaration of 1994 set out principles for a new approach; and later again when the Framework Declaration which elaborated them further was published. And of course I remember the hope aroused by the announcements by extremist groups on both sides of the cessation of violence which made it possible to bring into discussions elected representatives who could speak for them in negotiations.

These are my memories of stages along the difficult and winding road which led up to the Belfast Agreement, that is the Good Friday Agreement, of 1998. That agreement was the outcome of long and difficult negotiations between the parties. Unlike previous efforts at a settlement it was based on a new, inclusive approach which brought in those who spoke for more extreme groups which had turned away from violence. By then I had “hung up my briefcase” and retired from the Irish public service. But, like many others, I have watched with sympathy and silent encouragement from the sidelines.

The earlier efforts at a settlement which I have recalled here tonight did not succeed in their time. But without taking from the novelty of the Good Friday Agreement, I believe that they helped to put some of the necessary building blocks in place. In other respects the Belfast Agreement was novel—indeed possibly unique. It differs from all previous attempts at a settlement in that it has been ratified by the people in referenda North and South as well as by the British Parliament.
The Agreement is complex indeed, but it helps to bear out a belief I have always held—that we have enough political creativity in our two islands to turn away from the models in political textbooks and work out together a novel form of settlement to deal with the unsolved aspects of what has otherwise been a fruitful relationship between our peoples.

It is now more than three years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed. There have been many ups and downs in its implementation over that period but it is at last possible to believe that we have the structures in place to settle this difficult historic legacy and that they are beginning to work despite the perils with which they have been beset. I want to wish well to those engaged in this process and particularly to the Secretary of State, Dr Reid. I thank him for the address he has given us here this evening. We have both looked back over the past 30 years. Like him I believe that we have come a long way in that time and I would hope that those who are now beginning to work the structures of the Agreement will take encouragement from that.

It has been said that the opposite of pessimism is not optimism but hope; and that hope is when there is something which is worth working for. I believe that in this sense there is hope today in Northern Ireland, in Ireland, and in relations between these islands.