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THE PEACE PROCESS AND EQUALITY: 
TOWARDS A TRANSFORMED SOCIETY 

Brian Cowen, TD 

RESPONSE TO THE MINISTER 

Paul Arthur 

No. 4 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 PEACE PROCESS AND EQUALITY:
TOWARDS A TRANSFORMED SOCIETY

The Good Friday Agreement represents in an important sense the triumph of politics over darker forces in Irish society. Rather than seeking to define the contours of a final settlement, it lays out the ground rules in accordance with which political progress may be achieved. It represents a reversal of many of the more negative perspectives that were characteristic of the different parties to the conflict, such as the tendency to deny the nature of the problem and to attribute blame only to others. Change has been particularly traumatic for the unionist community, which has seen old certainties challenged. But the principle underlying the agreement, that of equality, offers the most secure prospect for a better life for all. It represents a shift from the old pattern of competition for supremacy between two communities to a new concern to transform the nature of the question in the pursuit of common interests.

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Brian Cowen, TD, is Minister for Foreign Affairs. He was born in 1960 and graduated in law from University College Dublin before qualifying as a solicitor. He was a member of Offaly county council and was first elected to the Dáil in 1984 in the constituency of Laois-Offaly. He has served as Minister for Labour (1992-93), Minister for Transport, Energy and Communications (1993-94) and Minister for Health and Children (1997-2000), as well as acting as opposition spokesperson for Agriculture (1994-97) and for Health (1997). He was appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs in January 2000.

Paul Arthur is Professor of Politics at the University of Ulster. He has published extensively on Northern Ireland politics, and his recent books include Special relationships: Britain, Ireland and the Northern Ireland problem (Blackstaff Press, 2001); Northern Ireland since 1968 (2nd ed., Blackwell, 1988), with Keith Jeffrey; and Government and politics of Northern Ireland (4th ed., Longman, 1994).
Let me begin by saying what a great pleasure it is to be here this evening. Politics can sometimes be a very day-to-day pursuit. Opportunities to stand back and take a broader perspective are rare enough to make them particularly welcome when they come along. So, thank you very much for the invitation to speak with you tonight.

The Institute has, of course, been carrying out excellent work in furthering study of the Good Friday Agreement and its implications for the network of relations on these islands; all associated with it are richly deserving of our thanks. May I also say that I greatly look forward to listening to Professor Paul Arthur’s reflections once I have resumed the comfort of my seat. I know that the Institute has already enjoyed much lively discussion, and I hope that we can add to that this evening.

Libraries have been written and many reels of tape have been filled about the Irish peace process. So I won’t presume to enunciate some new philosophy here. Let me instead share my personal perspectives with you, what it has meant to me to be part of the process, and how I see things for the future.

I

I will begin with some general observations. You won’t be surprised to hear that implementation of the Good Friday Agreement has provided some of the most challenging and frustrating, but also some of the most fulfilling, moments, of my political career. It has been an enormously rewarding experience.

No-one could take part in the process without giving a lot of thought, not just to the surface waves, but to the deeper currents we are navigating. It is one part of the Government’s agenda where you cannot fail to be conscious of the shadow of history.

Throughout his period in office, the peace process has been a matter of the highest priority for the Taoiseach, and those of us fortunate to have worked with him in this vital task have benefited enormously from his leadership, guidance and advice.

For me personally, the process has meant coming to terms in my own mind, and sometimes across the negotiating table, with issues that touch sensitive nerves in our collective make-up. There were times when my personal background gave me a spontaneous insight into people’s concerns—and not just those of the nationalist
community. There is actually a lot of read-across between nationalist and unionist reflexes on issues like pride in heritage, concern for dignity and hunger for respect.

Of course, there have been other times when my background required an extra effort of imagination to understand perceptions and priorities different from my own. By temperament and conviction I have always tried to set out my position as directly and plainly as I could. I have greatly appreciated when others have been able to do likewise.

Also, at a time when people can be dismissive or cynical about the political process, it gives me considerable pride, as a practising politician, that the sometimes maligned art of politics now looks set to prevail over one of the darkest aspects of our history. Irish people of both traditions would pride themselves on the political skills shown by leaders of Irish background in many different countries and over many different periods. It was a bitter irony that in our own island, rather than seeing those skills prevail, we experienced a bitter conflict which was enormously costly in terms of lives and well-being, and which diverted so many of our energies into sterile, and sometimes murderous, confrontations.

That we are now throwing off the burden of that failure is due to the efforts of many dedicated politicians in both islands over the last decade, and indeed before. Those politicians were no doubt very different in their philosophies, traditions and political records. They were at one, though, in their conviction that conflict in Ireland was now a scandalous anomaly from every point of view, and in their determination to deploy their political skills, and the resources of democracy, to free us collectively from the shackles of the past. Success in the peace process is a gratifying vindication of the profession of politics.

III

The peace process is an ambitious project, and, as with all ambitious projects, the risk of failure was never far away. Yet, at each critical juncture, the better angels eventually prevailed. The process not only survived the risks, but advanced the goal of putting democratic agreement in place of violent conflict. Agreement on basic principles with the British Government was reached. Cease-fires by the paramilitaries were achieved. Representative and broadly inclusive negotiations were launched.

In the Good Friday Agreement we decided collectively, for the first time, agreed ground rules on how to manage our differences and live together on this island, and between the two islands. These ground rules were endorsed in referendums and so were confirmed as the binding democratic mandate for the future. The institutions of the Agreement are now in place and at last operating broadly in accordance with the agreed blue-print. We have reached a moment of transformation in our history.

When representing Ireland abroad, I am often asked to define the underlying patterns of the Irish peace process, and its lessons for other conflicts. I usually answer
very cautiously, since each conflict contains unique features, often the very features which contain the key to a solution. Nevertheless, many conflict resolutions involve in essence a journey from denial, through acceptance, to affirmation. There is often a pivotal moment when the protagonists, having learned from bitter experience the scope of their capacity to degrade the quality of life for each other, come to see that conflict is not in fact preordained and that there is a better way. That is often a fraught moment, requiring visionary political leadership. The traditional patterns of confrontation are usually deeply ingrained. Treating the other side on a worst-case hypothesis means that you are politically protected even if the other side literally does its worst. Of course, that approach creates the dynamic of a self-fulfilling prophecy and the zero sum game mentality. The worst case approach is reciprocated. The score-card becomes obsessively and exclusively defined by the comfort or discomfort of the other side. The wider perspective is lost and the agenda on each side, ironically, is predominantly defined by the attitudes of the other. We are extremely fortunate that we are now breaking free of that vicious circle.

IV

When I look back on the interplay of our relationships, on an evening which happens to be the eightieth anniversary of the Anglo-Irish treaty, I find it depressing to note how much they were dominated by patterns of mutual denial.

- There was denial in our jurisdiction, a pretence that Northern Ireland did not exist except as a product of a false consciousness on the part of the unionists.

- There was denial in British thinking that Northern Ireland was no particular concern of Dublin, in spite of the obvious capacity of events in Northern Ireland to affect massively, for better or worse, the welfare of the rest of the island, including at the deepest level of political stability.

- There was denial in the tendency of many to view the communities in Northern Ireland as hopeless architects of their own misfortunes.

- There was denial in the refusal of both communities in Northern Ireland to accept each other’s identity and aspirations as legitimate.

If history looks kindly on the bridge-building work of recent generations of politicians—as I think it will do—it will be because of our collective success in dismantling these cocoons of denial. They may have given us individual comfort, but at great collective cost.

The gaps that existed between Irish and British perspectives on the constitutional aspects of the Northern Ireland issue have now been bridged. We have a set of institutions that fully reflects relationships on these islands. A North/South Ministerial Council is taking forward work on areas of mutual concern and benefit on the island. In the British-Irish Council, the administrations on these islands come together
as equals to promote the harmonious development of relationships between us. In the North, an executive, including representatives of all sectors of the political spectrum, is demonstrating a collective capacity for good government. Can we now, as it were, say our work is done?

In some respects, yes. A collective and consensual judgment by their political leaders as to what is best for the people living in Northern Ireland will have great political and persuasive value for all of us. Our goal will be to accommodate it rather than to try to second guess it. In that sense, the capacity of the new institutions in Northern Ireland to shape and lead their society will be deep and real, and will ultimately, I believe, produce a correspondingly serious new political response, by leadership and electorate alike.

V

At the same time, for all our welcome success, there is still much work to be done. Acceptable institutions are a hugely important and necessary condition, but not always a sufficient condition, to develop a new mind-set to match. In dealing with conflict resolution, it is realistic to expect some time-lag between the emergence of new institutions and the emergence of new attitudes, but to foster those new attitudes is now our most challenging agenda. Many events, not least those at Holy Cross school and throughout North Belfast, remind us of the need for urgency.

The essential role of the governments in that task is to assert the distinction between, on the one hand, what is non-negotiable because of conditions of principle and justice, and what, on the other, falls to the natural play of local politics. Confusion between these two things in the past has been the seed-bed for many of our difficulties, but I believe we have learned from our mistakes.

Political leaders in Northern Ireland face the double challenge of educating their own constituencies from within, and of leaving their traditional place of safety to reach out to the other side. I believe history will acknowledge the vision and courage of the political leaders who laid the ground-work for the Good Friday Agreement, and who implemented and sustained it. They all know only too well the depth of the individual challenges that they have faced.

If I single out David Trimble for mention this evening, it is not to diminish the enormous efforts of others, but because it is right to acknowledge the difficulties his community has faced.

For understandable reasons, the unionist community has often felt itself to be literally and metaphorically under siege—it is only right to acknowledge that the experience of violence has had a profoundly distorting effect on relations between the communities.
At a time in which a much wider debate on what it means to be British in the modern world is also underway, unionists have seen many of the unquestioned truths with which they grew up challenged.

Against that background of perceived loss, escapist politics can be very seductive, even addictive, and we do not lack those who seek to feed the habit. If you persuade people that the pressure for change comes only from the contrivance of enemies, then denouncing these enemies can seem a perfectly satisfying remedy. The untidy compromises of the peace process are measured not against the equally untidy realities, but by reference to some magically ideal starting point which has nothing to do with Irish history or geography.

It took more courage than perhaps people recognise for David Trimble to refer in his Nobel speech to Northern Ireland having been a cold house for Catholics.

Our collective task must now be to ensure that the temperature of the house should be the same for all, and that all the rooms will be equally open, and equally comfortable, for all who live there.

In doing so, we must examine what truthful reassurance can be given to those within the unionist community who feel genuine uncertainty and fears about the future.

VI

My answer would be that the Good Friday Agreement is not a matter of just channeling the currents of expediency. It has an organising principle, which is ultimately subject to objective test, and that is the principle of equality.

The Good Friday Agreement, at its core, rests on one simple insight: if orange domination of green was wrong and unworkable, green domination of orange would be equally wrong and unworkable. It follows that if you want to create a stable and constructive relationship between the two communities, it is pointless to try to do so except on the basis of equality.

There are some within the unionist community who, wrongly in my view, see equality simply as a concession to nationalists. But the principle of equality throughout the Agreement as a whole provides the same fundamental protections to both communities.

My own view is that unionist concerns about equality do not spring from opposition to the concept in itself. After all, it was their forbears who refined the notion, and, through their influence on America, helped make it a defining criterion of modern democratic society. I think their concern comes from a suspicion that the equality enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement is ultimately a ploy to enable one domination to be replaced by another. In that pessimistic view, Northern Ireland is implacably destined to be a chilly abode for one side or another, and it follows logically, exactly as in the past, that the only issue is to decide for whom.
The Good Friday Agreement has the capacity to transcend that “either/or” mind set and to avoid the pernicious trap of the zero-sum outlook.

It is based on the firm view that equality is not inherently a nationalist gain, or a unionist loss, or vice versa. It is the indispensable condition for stability and a democratic society. That is true of the political order, and those who truly want a stable and normal society will ignore it at their peril.

Equality is also, ultimately, a condition for prosperity. Investors are sensitive now as never before to the political and social context of their operations. They are wary as never before of locations where they feel uncomfortable, not only about the safety of their operations, but also about the quality of life the society has to offer. In a world where ethical and legal issues can make or break even the most powerful corporations, they do not want to be exposed to practices or structures they cannot defend. Northern Ireland’s Fair Employment Legislation was introduced, in part, in recognition of that fact. Initially regarded by some as a concession to nationalists, the legislation is now better understood across the board as offering a protection open neutrally to all. That is, I believe, what will happen to the equality agenda as a whole, once initial fears are allayed.

We in the Irish Government will do all we can to allay these fears. We will seek to make clear that the provisions of the Agreement mean what they say—and what the Agreement says on this point is very clear. We are pledged to a rigorous equality of treatment and respect as the governing principles for society in Northern Ireland, not just for now, or for when it might be expedient for nationalists, but permanently and irrespective of who the beneficiary might be.

I do not believe that anyone hankers after the mere reversal, rather than a genuine transformation, of the old relationship between orange and green.

I hope that all sides can see and believe that the equality agenda offers a basis for a genuine and lasting meeting of minds, as well as a legal protection against both the old patterns of discriminations and, of course, any new ones that might be attempted. If I am ever proved wrong on this, the evidence will be manifest. In such circumstances, unionists will be entitled to invoke the letter of the Agreement, and the spirit of fairness of the world at large. In those circumstances also they would not lack for allies in the nationalist community, and I and my colleagues in government would be strongly among their number.

That is why I believe our common goal now must be to implement the Agreement fully, indeed, if possible to “fast forward” that implementation. It is in our shared interests to make the maximum progress on all aspects of the Agreement, whether that be in relation to the equality agenda, policing, legal reform, decommissioning or on any other issue where progress remains to be made.
VII

History, so often cruel to us, has been kinder in recent times.

- Our peace process is still making progress, at a time when others around the world show the depths to which things can fall.

- The terrible events of 11th September found us far enough out of the cul de sac of violence that we could advance our journey rather than become bogged down.

- Our economic context, North and South, in spite of possible temporary downturns, holds out the hope of prosperity, as never before.

On every point of our agenda we have now made that good beginning which the Irish proverb rightly says is half the work. There is no cause here that I can see for either despondency or faint heart.

The role of the governments is to set out and where necessary defend the context for the new political dispensation that has been defined in the Agreement. But, once that is done, there are aspects of the Agreement which can be implemented only by the people on the ground in Northern Ireland and by their leaders. Equality is the key to their new relationship, and persuasion rather than dictation is the hallmark of a dialogue between equals.

Here, again, I am cautiously optimistic. In the past, the unionist and nationalist communities in Northern Ireland saw themselves as beleaguered outposts of their wider allegiances. For too long the wider British or Irish systems endorsed or at least acquiesced in that vision. That has changed. Now I sense that the more far-sighted unionist and nationalist leaders in Northern Ireland are coming to understand that they can draw on the best of both British and Irish traditions, and use these respective and often complementary strengths for the benefit of their society as a whole.

Eighty years on from the signature of the Treaty, the world has changed in ways that would truly have baffled the signatories. The motives for the bloody civil war that haunted them—and us—can now be precisely defined only by professional historians. I hope and expect the same will one day be true also of our recent troubles. The issues of sovereignty and allegiance which loomed so large around the Treaty table are now transformed on one level by the European Union, and on another by the information revolution. The pace of change is accelerating to the point where the only thing predictable about the future is that it will be unpredictable, indeed probably unrecognisable, from where we now stand.

In those circumstances there is a historical wisdom in concentrating, as the Agreement does, on the rules for the road ahead, rather than trying to define the final destination at this time.
What is certain is that the rules of equality, solidarity and mutual respect that we have enshrined in the Agreement will serve all the people of this island in all circumstances, just as the opposite qualities never will and never have. The future will belong to those who encourage and empower these values, in other words those who advocate the fullest and earliest implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, both in letter and spirit.

If the energies we all used in the past to defend against our fears can be redirected instead towards the service of our hopes, we can truly look to an island transformed for the better.

All of us, not just the Governments and political leaders, but individuals and civil society as a whole, have an important role in persuading the doubters among us of the value of that goal, a transformed and new society.
RESPONSE TO THE MINISTER
Paul Arthur

The minister talked about someone who is engaged in day-to-day politics as having very little time for reflection. Some of us do nothing but reflect, and as I listened to the minister I thought of Edmund Burke’s definition of the proper politician as a “philosopher in action”. I think we are beginning to see for the first time, in relations between these islands, more philosophy and more reflection than was the case in the past.

I want to set my remarks in the context of three themes—time, space and process—and parallel that with a discussion of what is to be found in any peace process: analysis, negotiation and implementation. The minister dealt mainly with the implementation stage and with the need for fast-forwarding. I think that this can usefully be seen in a much wider and deeper historical context. The minister spoke about the remarkable advances made in the past decade, and noted that this is the eightieth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty. This is the sort of timescale in which I will set my remarks.

Arthur Griffith once famously said, “In any issue I find out where England stands; Ireland will be found on the other side.” Even as late as 1969, when Patrick Hillary went to London for talks with the British Foreign Secretary, he was told in no uncertain terms that the matter of Northern Ireland was none of his or his government’s business. Contrast that with the much more accommodating position of the British government in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985, and particularly in the Belfast Agreement of 1998. This shows how far we have moved since then. More particularly, we have moved on psychologically in a very important sense, and people are putting the past behind them. In his report on decommissioning, Senator George Mitchell made a fundamental point: “If the focus remains on the past, the past will become the future, and that is something which no one can desire.” We still see this focus in what the American academic Byron Bland calls the “ritual of small differences”. We see it in the marching tradition to some extent. But I think we are beginning to put this obsession with the past behind us.

We have also moved away from the Woodrow Wilson model of the nation state. The minister set this in the context of changes within the European Union and the effects of the information revolution. In terms of our own peace process, a reading of Sinn Fein documents shows a fundamental shift between 1987 and 1992 in attitudes towards Europe. In 1987 the party was entirely hostile to what Europe stood for; by 1992 it realised that Europe was the future, and that they needed to be part of it, putting it in the context of Europe of the French Revolution and beyond, and the introduction of democracy.

We need also to be conscious of space. Our traditional description of the Northern Ireland problem was a misnomer; what in fact we were dealing with was an Anglo-
Irish problem. We needed to go back to the 1920s and to see the failures of the Treaty, and we needed to address the question in the context of these islands. Because we addressed it in a very narrow way, Irish political discourse became obsessional and introspective in dealing with the border question. Joe Lee in his magisterial study speaks of Ireland being dominated by what he calls the “Prospero complex”: the coloniser had created a neurotic sense of inferiority in the colonised. For a very, very long period, that was precisely the way in which successive governments in the Republic reacted to the superior body across the water.

But we have moved a long distance from the Prospero complex, to a tremendous self-confidence in this part of the island, something which is beginning to affect the other side of the island. To take an example well removed from the peace process, consider the downturn in the world economy as a result of the events of 11 September. In the past, this would have caused people in Dublin and elsewhere to moan yet another recession and to worry about the length of time it would take to recover. But yesterday’s budget conveys a sense that, while there are difficulties, these can be overcome. This strikes me as a tremendous example of the self-confidence and the self-esteem which has hit this part of the island and which is affecting the North. So the spatial dimension, moving from a narrow ground to these islands and beyond, has been very good for both governments and both sets of peoples.

One of the major factors, of course, has been Ireland’s role inside the European Union. As one official involved in this process, Eamonn Gallagher, put it in 1980, this allowed us to become less obsessional. Now, rather than seeing our relationship with Britain as being superordinate and subordinate, we can see it in terms of being coordinates working together. This is also to be seen in the Agreement of 1998, whose historic irony was highlighted by Vernon Bogdanor when he described it as “a return to Gladstone’s original conception of home rule in a form suited to modern conditions”. The combination of devolution within the United Kingdom with the North-South Council and the British-Irish Council were a Gladstonian-type response to problems of national identity in these islands. The agreement is based on a recognition not of two foreign countries, but of two countries working extremely closely together—a recognition of the importance of space.

My final point is on the question of the inclusive process. The minister referred in his speech to each conflict being in some sense unique. My recent experience of Columbia and Palestine is that everyone believes that their conflict is unique—that they have nothing to learn from anyone else. This creates its own immobilism and fatalism, which is very dangerous to any peace process. I have no doubt that South Africa had a major impact on our process. We learnt a great deal from them and that gave us the heart to move on. In our process, as the minister said, we have had a journey from denial, through acceptance, to affirmation—a journey of self-discovery. We have moved well beyond the patterns of mutual denial, with the New Ireland Forum of 1984 as the first serious attempt by this state to define what it means by Irish nationalism. We are in the business, again to quote the minister, of
transcending the “either-or” mindset—for the first time in the history of these islands, dealing with the whole business of communication and dialogue.

Returning to my opening point when I referred to analysis, negotiation and implementation, it may seem strange that it took us more than two decades to deal with the whole issue of analysis. We could not begin to talk about a solution until we had some common agreement on what the nature of the problem was, and that took us a very long time indeed to arrive at. Negotiation was conducted most intensively from the 1990s to 1998. The phase of implementation is even more difficult, but I am convinced that we are moving in the right direction.

I believe that—to use a phrase from the Secretary of State’s recent speech in Liverpool—there is a need for the governments to be “persuaders”, an expression used at an earlier stage by John Hume in relation to the Atkins conference of 1980-81, when he argued that the British must be persuaders. Now we realise that we all must be persuaders. We are in the business of communication and the need to be proactive extends beyond the political elite. The referendums of May of 1998 provided opportunity for the population of Northern Ireland to shed its fatalism and to tell the politicians it was time for them to fast-forward on a route down which we are still heading.