

**Written evidence submitted by David Adams, relating to Reconciliation
[RIN0001]**

Reconciliation: Some high-profile people in Northern Ireland dismiss reconciliation as impossible. Others claim it can only happen, as if by magic, in a New Ireland. And yet others claim they don't understand what is meant by reconciliation.

Let me address each of these:

Those who dismiss reconciliation as impossible tend to either be beneficiaries of division or can't imagine *themselves* ever reconciling with "the other side".

Yes, it will be difficult to achieve - if it wasn't we would have no need to pursue it. But it is by no means impossible, as shown by South Africa and Sierra Leone, to name but two examples.

To claim that reconciliation can only be achieved in a United Ireland is tantamount to saying "it can only happen after our tribe wins". This is a contradiction in terms, if ever there was one. Victory of one side over the other does not enhance the prospects of reconciliation, quite the opposite. Either we all win or we all lose. And the only way we all win is by reconciling with one another and deciding the future together.

A simple definition of reconciliation in respect of Northern Ireland would be: "The opposite of what we have now".

More specifically, to my mind it is the creation of a society where a critical mass of people lives at peace and in harmony with one another and all of our differences. A society where a person is judged not by the colour of their skin, their religion, culture, ethnicity, or politics. But simply by the nature of their character.

It is decidedly *not* a forced conversion, whether overt or covert, by any particular worldview of another. Nor is it an event, but a process that has no fixed endpoint. One that will require constant encouragement, nourishment, and guardianship.

As something of an aside, people tend to speak of "truth and reconciliation" as if the second follows the first as naturally as night follows day. There is no such certainty. Truth is an essential prelude to reconciliation, but reconciliation is by no means a certain byproduct of truth.

Division: Our society in Northern Ireland (NI) remains as divided as ever along political/religious grounds. And little wonder. Here are just some of the issues to be grappled with:

- A) Approximately 90% of social housing in the greater Belfast area, and at least 50% in the rest of NI, are still single identity.
- B) Despite numerous opinion polls over the years indicating that between 71% and 76% of parents would prefer integrated education for their children, only 8% of pupils in NI are able to attend integrated schools.
- C) Many of our teachers are trained separately, according to their religious designation.

- D) Victims, when not being ignored, are categorised as “theirs” and “ours” (depending upon at whose hand they suffered) and their suffering exploited for political point-scoring.
- E) Paramilitary groups still exist within communities and have done so for so long they are all but accepted as a part of our community. In effect, the abnormal has become the norm in NI. These groups terrorise their own communities, and are involved in virtually every kind of criminality from drug-dealing to extortion, protection rackets to the exploitation of women.

This segregation has many of our people growing to adulthood without ever knowingly (never mind meaningfully) engaging with someone from “the other side”. Indeed, some people will live their entire lives without ever having had any kind of direct engagement with an opposite number.

Why is does this situation pertain almost 30 years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA)?

The answer lies mainly with the majority of the parties in the NI Executive and assembly. (I do not include the SDLP and Alliance in this.)

One should bear in mind the nature of most of our political parties. Regardless of how they choose to describe themselves, they are ideologically nationalist - adherents to competing nationalisms. Of our two largest parties, one of them is, and always has been, opposed to the GFA. While the other does not support the existence of NI.

They fear the possible political implications of people from the two main communities getting to know one another as ordinary, everyday human beings who share the same hopes, dreams, struggles, fears, and concerns as themselves.

Divided from one another, each of these communities is well nigh predictable in how it will vote. But if reconciliation were to happen, to any great extent, that might well no longer be the case.

Who knows how people might vote if they lost their fear of “the other”.

Working-class Protestants might just decide to vote for a united Ireland or, conversely, working-class Catholics might decide that NI isn't such a bad place to live and raise their families?

What's for certain is that most of our political parties aren't willing to take a chance on that happening. They are afraid that reconciliation might turn out to be the midwife to the very opposite of their ideological/constitutional Nirvana.

To win a border poll, Irish nationalism continues to rely instead on “changing demographics” (ie Catholics outbreeding Protestants) and enough “middle ground” people losing support for a divided and barely functioning NI.

While, for its part, British nationalism is relying on successive Dublin governments refusing to gamble on holding a border poll in case it finds itself left with sole responsibility for an unreconciled (basket-case) NI.

For these reasons, most of our political parties are more than content to reign over a deeply divided NI.

Far from doing anything to encourage reconciliation, major political parties here (along with various of their surrogates on social and in mainstream media) do what they can to discourage it. “The other” is constantly denigrated; painted as a lesser creature; an enemy, to be feared and always guarded against.

Public figures from both sides are only too happy to play down to the worst stereotypes of their own tribe. Which, after all, serves to reinforce the wholly negative perceptions held by many on “the other side” who have never had the chance to learn from personal experience anything different.

Given the desire of most of our parties to make NI as unattractive as possible, it is hardly coincidental that every public service here is on its knees. (With Westminster always to blame, of course.)

Suggestions:

- A) This committee must call out certain of our political parties on their role(s) in promoting division. And keep calling them out until they desist from that. How about, for a start, the First and Deputy First ministers are encouraged to regularly go *together* to meet with victims of every background, regardless of who made them victims?
- B) This committee needs to keep hammering home to the NI parties that integrated education must be advanced (as per the GFA) to promote reconciliation from an early age. There are too many schools in NI resulting from the religious segregation of our children. In the short term, many of these schools could be amalgamated to cater for the integration of our children. Integrated education must not be allowed remain a novelty in NI but must become the norm. Also, the ludicrous practice of training Catholic and Protestant teachers separately must be ended as soon as possible.
- C) Tackling single-identity public housing areas will be much more difficult – but this committee should impress upon the NI parties that it must be tackled. As with our schools, a start could be made by amalgamating sports fields, recreation centres, hospitals, doctor’s surgeries etc - which often exist in close proximity to one another - duplicated for no other reason than to cater to religious/politically divided communities.
- D) Legacy is crucial to achieving progress towards reconciliation. If done properly, it can help alleviate long-held personal/community pain and resentments. If not, it will most certainly have the opposite effect.
There can be no excuses made, nor semi-justification given, for the wrongs committed by any group or government during the NI conflict.
As things stand at the moment, it appears the Irish government is set to play no more than a benign supervisory/oversight role in Legacy.
Are we really to believe that Irish security forces didn’t have multiple agents in at least one of the major paramilitary groups active during the Troubles? Or that their agents were always impeccably behaved? Were rogue police officers only a Northern Ireland thing?
There’s also the Republic’s “political offence” exemption law that existed throughout the Troubles. How can this not be considered an important part of our Troubles legacy? Can anyone seriously argue that it didn’t have a major negative impact on the

lives and well-being of people in Northern Ireland or, indeed, that it didn't help extend the conflict?

If Legacy is to have any credibility, and avoid doing more harm than good, then it cannot and must not be one-sided. *Both* the Irish and the British governments must publicly acknowledge their roles and mistakes during the Troubles.

- E) Paramilitaries must no longer be tolerated within NI society. There is much talk of some groups being “in transition” yet they have more members now than they ever had. If anything, they have merely transitioned into full-blown, organised criminal gangs.

Politicians, media, and others must stop consulting with or affording any kind of tolerance or credibility to these groups.

Government must give them an ultimatum: Either issue a public statement of their group's total disbandment by [*date*] (and stand-by this statement) or the full rigours of the law will be brought down upon them.

Also, the NI Executive must cease providing funding and legitimacy, as they are currently doing, to multiple community-groups-by-day and paramilitaries-by-night outfits. If not, the Executive must be held to account by this committee.

April 2026