

The Good Friday Agreement – 25 years on

Helen Jackson

Helen Jackson was Labour MP for Sheffield Hillsborough for 13 years from 1992. During the pivotal period from 1997, she was Parliamentary Private Secretary to three successive Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland. She is the author of People's Republic of South Yorkshire (Spokesman Books, revised edition 2023, £12.99).

In March 2023, 50 people young and older gathered in the Central United Reformed Church in Sheffield to discuss the possibility of the different political parties in Northern Ireland coming together again to restore the power sharing institutions. Under the auspices of Labour for Irish Unity, we listened to Geoff Bell discuss his recent book, *The Twilight of Unionism*. Francie Molloy, the Sinn Fein MP for Mid Ulster, and I talked about our varied experiences before, during and since the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was signed in Belfast 25 years ago.

My focus was around the role played by women in the run up to the Agreement and its fragile and somewhat tortured implementation since. How can women help solve the present impasse created by the refusal of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to take part in the devolved institutions set up under the Agreement?

The Sheffield meeting took me back to my work as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Mo Mowlam. Mo called me the day after the 1997 General Election when Tony Blair appointed her as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. She said she was off to meet shoppers in the Saturday market in Belfast, so they would understand how she wanted to work with the people to bring about a respite from violence.

When I met her the next day in London, she explained that she wanted me to do the normal Parliamentary work, but also to go over to Northern Ireland as much as possible:

'We can't do this, Helen, without the support of the women! There are only

men running the existing unionist or nationalist parties over there, but it is women whose lives and families are being ruined by the terror, so we have to harness their support.'

My role was agreed with John Chilcot, her senior civil servant, and my Parliamentary life was transformed. Mo suggested I ask Lady Mayhew, wife of the former Secretary of State in John Major's government, to let me have contact details of key women who were helpful. At the same time, Mo would slip me invitations from community groups which she couldn't manage to fit in herself.

Women in Northern Ireland knew that a women's political party that represented communities across the cultural divide was urgently needed. As the deadline for registering a new political party drew near, urgency was required and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was formed only just in time. Many remarkable women, leaders in their communities, shared in this achievement.

Monica McWilliams from a nationalist community and Pearl Sagar from a loyalist area become the two NIWC members at the peace talks, which were now underway. At first the women were subjected to considerable barracking from Unionists. Mo asked me to sit in the front row of the visitors' gallery so that the men were aware that Mo would know who to blame for any difficulties. George Mitchell, from the United States, now chaired the 'Talks' process, bringing his excellent negotiating skills to the table and, in due course, the women were listened to carefully. Hillary and Bill Clinton kept in close touch.

Meanwhile, the Peace Process was getting good support from the European Union, which offered a generous 'Peace and Reconciliation' package of funding. This included finance for community based political education and training for the many voluntary and peace groups that were being created.

The final few days of the talks were dramatic, for many reasons. Everyone felt tired and tense. The Unionists were split. Jeffrey Donaldson, from the Ulster Unionist team, walked out to join the DUP led by Ian Paisley, who were against the Agreement. David Trimble and most of his Ulster Unionists accepted it. Speaking afterwards with Mo, she was both exhausted and anxious as she spelt out how she needed the two referendums in Ireland, North and South, to take place before July 12th, the start of the marching season. The necessary legislation had yet to be drafted, agreed with the Irish government and put through the Westminster Parliament. In the North, the Vote 'No' campaign was in full swing

whereas the Vote ‘Yes’ campaign was in its infancy. Women are absolutely crucial to the outcome, insisted Mo Mowlam, so the work intensified between Easter and May 22nd 1998.

Only after a positive vote both North and South of the border could a devolved administration based in Stormont take on the task of power sharing. There was real rejoicing and relief as the YES votes piled up on both sides. Stormont became alive. Mo organised a big party in the grounds, with music from Elton John. David Trimble was sworn in as first minister and Seamus Mallon of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) as deputy, working together to bring about peace, reform and stability across the two communities.

Revisiting this remarkable history reminded me that the problems initiated with the Brexit vote are not yet over. Rishi Sunak and the EU’s Windsor Framework is a start. It’s now crucial to revive a working cross-party devolved administration so that all the population feel empowered to manage their future. We have heard from so many of the participants, journalists and politicians who were at the talks stressing how the Good Friday Agreement model had become an international blueprint used across nations, but only a few have given space or emphasis to the deliberate inclusion of women in the communities to its success. Avila Kilmurray, remains a respected community development organiser across Northern Ireland and told me days before the Sheffield meeting that it is clearly women who want its re-establishment the most. During the questions and answers, all were adamant that no one wants to go back and reinstate a hard border.

Who knows? Another border poll in the future – North and South – peaceful and constructive, might conclude that a united Ireland within the European Union is the best pragmatic outcome for this centuries-old problem.

