



## Impressions of European Mediation Conference – Belfast (April 2008)

It was only by listening to the taxi driver's radio that I remembered this first day of the conference to be the tenth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. Radio commentators were remembering how the British and Irish governments, along with Northern Irish Republicans and Unionists, aided by famous Americans such as Bill Clinton and George Mitchell, signed off on a power-sharing accord that still holds today.

That ended thirty years of the "Troubles", in which more than 3,500 citizens died violent deaths and 30,000 were injured in seemingly interminable civil conflict. How quickly we forget that the U.K. – not just in the streets and shops and pubs of Belfast but also in London – had decades of bombings and shootings, sometimes on a daily basis, carried out by home-grown terrorists fighting for their lives.

### The Conference

The event was not to be "about" this conflict or this agreement, but its timing gave the opportunity for many of the peace process leaders to gather in one place and remind us how a prolonged, intractable dispute was finally settled. Some of the leaders who spoke were Martti Ahtisaari of Finland, Brenden McAllister, Pat Colgen and Lord Paul Bew of Belfast, Dermot Ahern of Dublin, Jan Egeland of Norway, and John Paul Lederach of the U.S.

For me it was not the terms of the agreement that mattered most. The important lesson was how many years were needed for the various fighting groups to learn about each other, figure out what they could live with, and build the capacity for a settlement.

A huge effort is still going on to repair the damage, heal from the atrocities, sustain community cooperation, and make the power-sharing government work to mutual advantage. The European Union, Dublin, and London have organized and donated multi-billions of euros since 1999 to address cross-border issues, repair and upgrade infrastructure, devise person-to-person programs for Catholics and Protestants, address racism, trauma (every North Ireland family has someone harmed), and reintegrate career combatants into ordinary society. We were told that at this point the job is probably only about one-half done and years' more sustained effort is required.

Most mediators of my acquaintance work to improve their skills in running mediation sessions, exploring options, crafting settlements – all very important. But the veterans of the Northern Island conflict handle these things as second nature. Their more conscious focus is on orchestrating the multiple tracks, parties and groups, the agencies and institutions, neighborhoods and political bodies, all of which must be engaged over long periods of time. The high-level public negotiations (Track 1) that get on nightly news might be considered the least important compared to the Track 2 and 3 negotiations and projects that have continued for years, mostly hidden from view. These involve people closer to everyday life who affect routine survival and try to breathe oxygen back into the economy.

Of course people talk about their needs and interests, just as we would expect in the mediation process. Most of their time, though, seems to be spent soaking up background

information, searching for the right contacts, creating conditions for discussion, and finding ways for truth to be spoken, bosses made accountable and justice done while envisioning a viable future. They introduce key people who can only meet safely in secret, raise money from fatigued donors, kick off yet more small projects to promote interaction and (hopefully) cooperation, light fires where nothing is happening, put them out when too hot.

It's a combination of community organizing, state building, organizational development, as well as conflict resolution. Their clientele can be people with little hope, often maimed in clashes, still suffering from trauma, strongly identified with crumbling factions that could easily become spoilers if not economically and socially reintegrated. The task is to rekindle any spark of constructive energy during periods of calm. Plans, schedules and agendas are in continuous flux. Indeed, mediation that we have thought of as a codified service, must instead be understood as a capacity for a much wider range of interleaved activities. Through all of this, what necessarily remains rock-solid is the intention to form a stable and resourceful peace.

In their spare time these peace veterans come to professional conferences and try to tell the rest of us what they do. Mostly we want to hear about some key ingredient or secret process. We would be happy with a list of do's and don'ts. It would be nice to hear a narrative that covers conflict origins, major clashes, failed attempts, lessons learned, corners turned, and ultimate denouement. Their speeches try to accommodate us, but what you finally see are profiles of the traditional virtues – wisdom, justice, faith, patience, hope, fortitude, generosity, honor, courage. These qualities are then combined with extraordinary comprehension of ever-changing dynamical complexity – multiple systems of individual psychological processes, sociological interactions and cultural structures. The story they told of resolving Northern Ireland's "troubles" has a beginning, middle and end, but no plot-line will tell you what has really happened.

## The City of Belfast

The city is has no end of charm.



But it is marred and marked by the conflict – the fences (they call “peace fences”) that separate the Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods, the migration of restaurants and entertainment out of the city center to safer districts, damaged and



abandoned buildings, highly political murals (some of them works of art) filling huge spaces on the sides of buildings. But the construction cranes are all about and there are clusters of new and refurbished edifices.

We took the commuter train and busses all over and found the place to be truly lovely. Eateries of all kinds range from good to excellent and smoking is now completely banned in public places including the pubs (unlike what is shown here).



The waterway that made Belfast a commercial and ship-building capital in the past now provides comfort for the mind and eyes. Many places that previously were “no-go” areas are now public parks for everyone. Residents we talked to referred to the “troubles” as over, never to return. Still, the “peace fences” aren’t taken down yet. As we were told several times – the social services professionals are continuing to work with citizens, to facilitate interactions and build trust. The fences won’t be dismantled until it is judged that the people are truly ready.