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Personal Background

I was born in January of 1998, 3 months prior to the signing of the historic Good Friday Agreement that stopped the violence and brought peace to Northern Ireland. As a child, I grew up in a loyalist area of East Belfast that has a culture of parades, flags, bonfires, and paramilitary style murals splashed on the walls. However, as a child I had little to no knowledge of the political context of these symbols, how they can be viewed as hurtful and oppressive, or how they had contributed to the political deadlock of our local governing institutions. You only have to look at the Haass-O'Sullivan talks to understand how raw issues of the past, flags, and parades remain for those within our political establishment and the older generations. Professor Dominic Bryan stated that the contention related to symbols in the public realm is an evolution of the conflict, as the guns and bombs have disappeared new areas of contention have arisen as a fight for the public space emerges via contesting emblems (5). I will return to this issue in the section examining the Good Friday Agreement in detail. However, returning to my earlier point, as a child these symbols were little more than decoration that marked my summer holidays. As a child the Twelfth of July was an opportunity to have a hot dog before 12pm from a street food van as flute bands marched by in colourful uniforms. Flags, painted kerbstones, and images of masked men with guns seemed little more than decoration. These experiences were my normal and lacked their political contexts through the eyes of a child with little knowledge and understanding of the conflict. Unfortunately, as I will now discuss, there was little place to discuss the meaning and contentious nature of these symbols in a safe and structured environment.

In Northern Ireland we have two main periods of schooling; primary school for those aged 4-11, and then secondary school for those aged 11-16 to complete their GCSEs. If a young person successfully achieves 5 A*-C grade GCSEs, they are able to study for an additional two years for their A level examinations.

My experience at primary school did little to illuminate the fact that I live in a society that is classified as "post-conflict" or as a "divided society". Like most young people in Northern Ireland I attended a single-faith primary school. Currently, less than 10% of schools (both primary and secondary) are classified as being integrated education in which students from both dominant community backgrounds are educated together (1). My experience of religious education was dominated by typical Christian stories based on the problematic assumption that we all identified as Christian. There is a famous joke in Northern Ireland that person A asks person B are they Protestant or Catholic, person B responds they are Jewish, and person A asks again are they a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew. This illustrates two things. One, how religious identity markers of Protestant and Catholic in the Northern Irish context have become heavily contorted and intertwined with political affiliations. Secondly, how little consideration is given to other faiths. This very problem is replicated in the Good Friday Agreement itself as our politicians are forced to identify within a framework

of Unionist, Nationalist or other. However, the issue I wish to highlight is that despite this Christian religious education we failed to learn that there could be different versions of Christianity. Therefore, for a long time, I had no knowledge of the fact that I was a Protestant and that there are multiple ways to practice Christianity. So if I had no knowledge that I was a Protestant and what this meant in a general sense of the word, then I had even less knowledge about what being a Protestant meant in the context of living in Northern Ireland. Therefore, my initial religious education did not prepare me with any knowledge about who I was, or what religion meant in the context of the society that I lived within. This lack of structured knowledge meant that I got my understanding of what religion was via dangerous and uninformed communal myths.

My first encounter of the term Catholic was from the older kids in my community, they told us younger ones that Catholics has broken our bus stop, and that you could identify someone as Catholic if their eyes were too far apart. Therefore, I rationalised in my childhood brain that Catholics must be bogeymen that came out at night to destroy innocent bus stops and that I should avoid people with strange eyes. This bogeyman image perpetuated within my community impacted us so much so that when asked by researchers if we would be friends with a Catholic, we all said no. For context, researchers from Queen's University Belfast conducted an experiment when I was P7 (aged 10-11) as my class was interviewed in a group setting. We were shown pictures of different people and given their identities and then asked if we would befriend that person. For example, they showed us pictures of people who were Jewish, Muslim, Black, Gay etc. and explained who they were before asking us if we would befriend that person. For the most part, we happily agreed to befriend almost everyone except the person who we were told was an Irish Catholic. An entire room of almost thirty 10-11yr olds refused to be this person's friend because they were Catholic. I remember that my teacher told us that she was disgusted with us, but to us we were told that this person vandalised our bus stops. Looking back retrospectively makes me think two things. One, we did not receive any information within a controlled and safe environment to talk about what any of these labels meant and therefore received our information elsewhere from communal myths. Therefore, looking back I am disgusted that we did not receive the proper education and knowledge about who we were and who are neighbours in the other community were, and were forced to rely on dangerous and non-factual community hearsay. Second, this reminds me of the famous quotation by Nelson Mandela in which he argues that no child is born hating another because of their skin or religious background, and that hatred is learned. I would say that this picture of a Catholic individual did not invoke hatred from myself or my classmates, rather we were like parrots mimicking what we had heard in the environment that surrounded us. We repeated what we heard from the older kids, as they repeated what they heard from their generation of older kids in a cyclical fashion. However, left unchallenged these mimicked communal myths could grow to become seeds of hatred even among children who never experienced the conflict in the same way in which our parents had.

My first encounter with the term Protestant had been through a schoolyard game in which we all would ask one another if we were pigs (coded as Protestant) or cows (coded as Catholic). I remember being asked if I was a pig or a cow for the first time by one of the

older kids in my neighbourhood and I answered that I was neither as I very clearly did not moo or oink. The older girl then persisted that I was either a Protestant or Catholic and I had little idea of what these terms meant. So naturally I asked my mum who very nervously asked where I had heard this, had I been playing in areas that I was told I was never to ever go near under any circumstances (aka the Short Strand interface area)? She then informed me that I was Protestant and that that question could be very dangerous. Not one to head this warning, me and the rest of my class began to ask one another if we were pigs or cows, always answering pig before having a giggle, and then repeating the process of asking again. We eventually developed to ask if we were plates or cups with similar coding. So my knowledge of religion and the conflict consisted of that fact that I was a pig and Catholics were bogeymen who could be identified via their eyes. Of course this knowledge remained unchallenged as school failed to provide a channel to challenge these communal myths and stereotypes, we were educated separately and therefore could never interact with young people from the other side, and we also lived separately. More than 90% of social housing in Northern Ireland remains segregated on the grounds of religious background (2). Therefore, we lived and learned within our insulated communities. Looking back these are almost humorous anecdotes of how I tried to make sense of the world I found myself in, however as previously mentioned left unchecked these funny childish assumptions could grow into hateful and suspicious stereotypes.

Similar to our religious education, our education of history does little to inform young minds of the conflict or the peace process. For most part the question of Irish history was off the table as we learned about the Stone Age, British Monarchs such as Henry VII and Elizabeth I – far removed from anything related to the place in which we lived due to the contested nature of our history. The first opportunity to learn about the conflict in Northern Ireland is through GCSE history. However, history is an elective GCSE meaning that not every child will get the opportunity to study our history within a controlled setting focused on fact. Furthermore, not every school teaches the period of the conflict known as the Troubles starting from the Northern Irish Civil Rights Movement to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, as some schools chose to focus on the earlier historical period related to the third Home Rule Bill crisis and the eventual partition of Ireland (3). This is problematic as it means many of our young people do not get the opportunity to learn about the conflict in a fact-focused manner that is free of bias. As previously stated, this leads to dangerous situations as young people fill the void of their knowledge on this topic via a biased lens of divisive communal historical memories which demonise the opposing side (4). Part of the reluctance to study history within educational settings derives from the fact that we have no agreement about what the Troubles was. This is reflected within the Good Friday Agreement as it is reliant upon a constructive ambiguity, this will be discussed in further detail in the section examining the Good Friday Agreement.

As for political education? It was not on the curriculum until A Level. How can young people learn about the political institutions of power-sharing, or what the Good Friday Agreement is without a political education? This is made more problematic by the fact that many working-class young people, particularly working-class Protestant boys, do not reach the A Level stage to make that decision to study political education for the first time. Therefore,

our education system does not provide a safe or neutral space to discuss who we are as individuals, our histories, or our politics. Many young people in working-class areas who fail to reach A Level never get the opportunity to learn about the conflict or the Good Friday Agreement in a factual manner, and therefore become reliant on communal myths to fill the gaps. Many of these young people become stuck in poverty traps and are taken advantage of by paramilitary thugs. The influence of paramilitarism upon our working-class young people is evident today twenty-plus years after the ceasefires. In the summer of 2021 young people were directed to engage in street violence as paramilitary figures stood within crowds of adults who cheered them on (6). For young men within my community who fail to achieve within education and become stuck in poverty traps the allure of paramilitarism and the ability to achieve and gain status in other means is tempting. Especially as they failed to get the opportunity to learn about the opportunities that have arisen from peace.

Due to personal difficulties in my early teens, I was unable to continue my secondary education within a mainstream traditional schooling setting. I attended the Belfast Hospital School and then completed my GCSEs in Open Doors which were both alternative education providers. Due to a lack of funding, these programmes had no choice but to be integrated and therefore, this was the first time I had the opportunity to meet people from a Catholic/Nationalist background. We learned together over the course of two years during a contentious period of time as the decision was made to no longer fly the British flag 365 days per year. However, unlike other cross-community schemes in which people from the two communities are stuck in orange and green hoodies for photo opportunities, despite this tumultuous period we had built relationships with one another. We may not have agreed with each other, but we respected each other as individuals and as friends to not fall out over political issues. I want to stress that this is no small feat in the context of Northern Ireland. This experience drastically changed my life as I got to really meet the other community in a genuine manner.

Some of us who attended the alternative education programme had the opportunity to attend a conference hosted by the Department of Employment & Learning (now known as the Department of Communities) to talk about our experiences of education, employment, and training programmes. Through this experience I found myself involved with the NEET Youth Forum. This forum was formed by third-sector charitable organisations who worked with vulnerable young people, and empowered them to find their voice and lobby local government to provide better outcomes for young people. This group consisted of both young people from PUL (Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist) and CNR (Catholic/Nationalist/Republican) backgrounds. However, more than these labels were not ones of importance, the young people in this group were multi-faceted individuals with experience of living with mental health illnesses and learning difficulties, experience of being an LGBTQ+ young person, experience of living in the care system etc. We were more than just a Protestant or just a Catholic and that was empowering. For the first time, this label was not the most important one in my life.

I was involved with the NEET Youth Forum for 3.5 years and during this time we lobbied for better outcomes for young people. One of the most important things that you can take from

my testimony in terms of how young people view the Good Friday Agreement would be this. As previously explained the educational system is not set up to inform young people about what the Good Friday Agreement is but they know that we live in a very different time period compared to that in which are parents grew up. We know that we have peace, and we want to talk about the present and the future – not the past. As a scholar of transitional justice, I now know the importance of transitional justice mechanisms exploring the past - however I will discuss this further in the section related to what you as a committee can do to support the peace process and young people’s understandings of the GFA. My experiences as a young person lobbying for change informed me that young people want to move on from issues of flags, parades, and policing – we want to talk about social issues such as equal marriage, access to abortion, climate change, better education and employment opportunities for young people so that we have a future here etc.

The Good Friday Agreement & The Peace Process

One of the first times I got to learn about the Good Friday Agreement with any real substance was at A Level Politics. I had the opportunity to learn about the context of the agreement and what it had achieved, and the different strands of governance. The first time I got to study the document in any great analytical detail was during my undergraduate at university. As previously mentioned, many young people do not get the opportunity to learn about the Good Friday Agreement and what it achieved. Therefore, without this knowledge many young people dismiss the Good Friday Agreement as part of the past associated with topics related to flags, parades, and policing. We want to move on from this part of our history and therefore let’s not talk about the Good Friday Agreement. However, as previously mentioned many young people in Northern Ireland do not get the opportunity to learn about the history of the conflict or the peace process in a neutral manner free of bias. Therefore, there is a lack of appreciation for what the Good Friday Agreement achieved and simultaneous lack of understanding of how it continues to stagnate meaningful post-conflict transition.

First and foremost, the Good Friday Agreement brought peace to Northern Ireland in a manner that previous agreements had failed to do so. For the first time, Unionists and Nationalists agreed to share power and govern via consociationalist mechanisms. Similarly, paramilitaries from both sides agreed to put down their weapons in the pursuit of peace. This is an incredible achievement and one I am incredibly thankful to have benefited from as I grew up in relative peace compared to my parents. However, the reason that peace was achieved was due to the constructive ambiguity of the Good Friday Agreement. You could read this document as a stepping stone to Irish unity or as securing the current union within the British state. Furthermore, issues of the past such as victims and what the Troubles actually was were neglected within this agreement. This agreement started a pattern of behaviour within our political representatives in which they failed to agree on fundamental issues of the past and therefore failed to deal with them at all. To date, Northern Ireland has had a fragmented piecemeal implementation of transitional justice mechanisms. The lack of an agreed upon truth has enabled communal myths and divisive truths to remain

uncontested. Local politicians have abused safety net protocols such as the petition of concern mechanism to prevent social issues that young people are passionate about such as equal marriage to be discussed within legislative chambers.

The Good Friday Agreement has failed to deliver true peace in the sense of dismantling master status communal labels and living as one community. We live in separate communities divided by the walls of identity and physical walls of contesting emblems, flags, and so-called peace walls themselves. We are educated separately in a system in which schools are reluctant to teach young people about our conflicted past, and who can blame them when our peace agreement failed to deliver mechanisms that would help navigate issues of the past. I could talk on length about the pros and cons of the Good Friday Agreement but will refrain from doing so. In short, young people's relationship with the Good Friday Agreement is complex and multi-faceted. Denied the opportunity to learn about the agreement in any great depth until our later schooling years, the Good Friday Agreement sits as something that is both appreciated for achieving a more peaceful society and resented for its lack of ambition and its manipulation from the dinosaurs of Stormont. In the next section I will suggest what you can do as the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Asks to the American Sub-Committee

I would like to ask the American Sub-Committee of Foreign Affairs to consider committing to the following asks:

1. Invest in our young people in Northern Ireland. Provide opportunities to empower young people who need it most, young people who cannot see past cyclical tit for tat violence, young people who have been failed by the system and see paramilitarism as the only opportunity to make something of themselves. Give young people the opportunity to experience a world beyond what happened at interface areas. Invest in grassroots community relations projects that are building meaningful relationships between young people and fostering genuine change as opposed to tick box exercises.
2. Champion young activists from Northern Ireland who are fighting and championing issues close to them such as street harassment, climate change, the commission of abortion services, better mental health provision etc. Champion our voices and our experiences of what living in a post-conflict and divided society is like, and how we can continue to improve.
3. Clearly tell Northern Irish politicians that peace is a continued process that did not stop at the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. As a divided society we have a lot of work to do in terms of building peace at a grassroots level and this starts with serious consideration of how we integrate the very structure of our society. Take integrated education. 71% of people in Northern Ireland agree with the principle of integrated education, however, thinking practically what would an integrated school look like? Would current schools be changed to integrated schools? What about the fact that the very map of Northern Ireland is divided into Unionist and Nationalist

areas, would a young Nationalist feel safe to attend school in a PUL area? Challenge our politicians to really think about the next steps to peace and what does a concrete vision of peace look like. Challenge our politicians to stop kicking difficult issues such as dealing with the past into the long grass and finally deliver on issues of truth and justice.

Thank you for your engagement in Northern Ireland and for platforming young people's thoughts on the Good Friday Agreement and peace as a whole. I could have written a book on this topic and would be happy to answer any further questions at any stage in the future.

Sources

1. Integrated Education Fund, more information found [here](#)
2. The Irish Times, Issue of segregated housing in Northern Ireland, more information found [here](#)
3. The Guardian, Is the curriculum dividing Northern Ireland's schools, more information, found [here](#)
4. Dealing with the past; the administration of justice. With specific reference to the Colombian and Northern Irish conflicts. Undergraduate Dissertation
5. Professor Dominic Byran research portal, more information [here](#)
6. Summer 2021 riots, more information [here](#)