

## SUBMISSION TO US HOUSE SUB-COMMITTEE ON EUROPE, ENERGY, THE ENVIRONMENT & CYBER

**Topic:** What can we do to enable young people to sustain peace in Northern Ireland?

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### Introduction

Thank you, Chairman Keating for that warm introduction and also let me take this opportunity to thank you, your staff and committee members for inviting me to give testimony today. It is an honour and a privilege to have my voice heard on this important topic and indeed, to speak on behalf of our youth community here in Northern Ireland (NI).

### Context

According to the Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency (NISRA), as of 2020, there were approximately 224,202 young people aged 15-24 living, working, and being educated in NI. Additionally, it is estimated that 600,00 young people have been born in NI since the signing of the peace concord; a cohort who have since been named the 'peace generation' marked with optimism and hope given that a great deal has been achieved in NI since the peace concord was secured in 1998.

Also, despite the global pandemic and the hardship brought with it, youth unemployment in NI is at an all-time low, academic achievement for this cohort continues to outrank achievement rates in other devolved nations and more young people are moving into higher education and higher paid jobs than ever before. In short, there is much for young people to be hopeful about in NI.

Yet, in the week leading up to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, collective youth rioting broke out on the streets of Belfast and further across the province. This outbreak generated cause for concern that the ongoing peace process may be more fragile than originally anticipated given that such sectarian violence was spear-headed by the young people who were born post cease-fire and therefore did not bear witness to the atrocities of the conflict here in NI.

During the 7-night spate of violence, cars were set alight, a bus was hijacked and set on fire, petrol bombs were thrown, 88 police officers were injured, multiple communities were left with damage done to their property and children as young as 13 were arrested for riotous behaviour. The gravity and extent of the violence was evidenced by the level of international media coverage received and the fact that commentators speculated how the riots were a result of collective youth efforts thus naming the unrest as some of the worst seen since 1998. Yet, how much these young people knew about Brexit, the politics of the UK's withdrawal from the EU or indeed the Public Prosecution Service's decision about covid breaches at a high-profile republican funeral was indeed doubtful, as was the extent to which these events drove their active engagement in the riots.

In the immediate aftermath of this violence, I was particularly struck by an interview given by a young male involved in the rioting who explained that regardless of how little he knew or understood about the current state of politics and related decisions, adults and leaders within his community told his peers that a threat and an insult had been made to their community identity,

that the State could not be trusted to support them, and that if they did not defend their identities, they would lose them. This dangerous narrative of hostility, otherness and exclusion was bolstered by sinister paramilitary forces encouraging youth onto the streets in the hope that doing so would create a snowballing effect, but also by much deeper and systemic forces leading to wider disenfranchisement.<sup>1</sup>

Before, I go any further, it is important to note that most of our young people are pro-social, law-abiding citizens with a thirst for positivity, progression and peace. Despite the unrest of April 2021, we have not seen a return of violence on mass here in NI, nor do I anticipate that we will see a full recapitulation of The Troubles in the format they previously took.<sup>2</sup>

However, the ceasefire generation are facing a different type of conflict, one which is often present in many societies transitioning to peace. It includes intergenerational trauma, poverty, exclusion, othering, poor mental health, reduced service provision and in the wake of both Brexit and the Global Pandemic, the aftereffects of isolation and related social ills. It would seem that a new war is at play, in the North, one in which many young people experience hardship and one in which not all young people experience equally.

### Personal Experience

Chair Keating, Committee members and expert witnesses, I am 32 years old. Throughout my career I have had the privilege of working with some of the most gifted, talented, and compassionate young people you could imagine. Coincidentally, these young people are also deemed to be the most marginalised and excluded from society. They have engaged in riots, criminality, drug misuse and anti-social behaviour. More often than not, they have been incarcerated, school removed, placed under the care of the welfare system, found themselves to be school aged parents and in some tragic cases lost their lives prematurely to suicide and other related social ills.

My own doctoral research focused on better understanding of these experiences from the perspective of young people who had been excluded from the mainstream school system. My key finding was that school exclusion was the manifestation of oppressive relational dynamics experienced within and outside of the mainstream school, in communities and most other spaces these youth occupied- a theme I will return to throughout this session.

Now, as an elected representative here in NI, and as the Executive Director of Politics in Action (PIA), I have committed myself to ensuring these voices are amplified and heard. What I have learned

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<sup>1</sup> A number of skilled academics have looked closely at the primary drivers of the recent unrest. One of whom is Dr Colum Walsh who has produced a detailed report which sought to understand the riots from the perspective of those who were physically closest to them, and then present findings in a way that could enhance understanding and contribute towards prevention. His report found that multiple factors led to the recent unrest including (but not limited to) (i) lack of connection to the community; (ii) the normalisation of violence; (iii) gendered and social norms towards violence; (iv) the enduring presence of paramilitaries; (v) a lack of hope amongst youth rioters and their communities and (vi) the need for more effective role and responsibility clarification of local services such as youth workers. His report is an important read for anyone seeking to understand the current climate disenfranchised young people are facing and what can be done to support them to engage pro-socially on issues they care about.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, we do not have ample time today to highlight the positive contributions young people have made to sustaining peace in NI since the signing of the GFA nor indeed, throughout the pandemic. Suffice to say the contribution has been substantial and continues to grow. Further examples of specific contributions and movements are available upon request.

throughout my own research and work experiences is that the central factor leading these young people astray is the multi-layered feeling and experience of oppression. At the same time, we know that The Troubles in Northern Ireland resulted from feelings and experiences of oppression on a grand scale. And so, we must ask ourselves, what lessons can be learned from the past to enable us to create a brighter future with and for our young people to play a role in sustaining peace?

For a start, we know that peace has not been evenly felt in across Northern Ireland. We also know that the areas most effected by the conflict and its legacy continue to host the highest rates of poor educational attainment, poor mental health, a lack of integration and reduced social provision- In short, oppression.

Thankfully, research has also shown us that in addition to the need for shared housing, education, social care and economic provision, to sustain peace, we also need to ensure that all residents, especially young people, feel a sense of belonging and connectivity, that they are given opportunities to achieve positive recognition and secure representation they can identify with.

Article 12 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that *all* children have the right to have their views heard and for them to be taken seriously. Yet, it is the young people who are the hardest to reach that rarely have their voices heard or sought out. Instead, they are stigmatised, their views downgraded and ignored.

Anti-oppressive practitioners have demonstrated that when effort is dedicated to engaging young people in a critical analysis of their experiences, new opportunities for change can emerge. If channelled correctly, the voices of these excluded youth could become a catalyst for authentic change and sustained peace.

With that in mind, I want to give a few examples as to the United States could work with NI, the UK and Southern governments to develop opportunities for young people to turn away from violence, engage in critical analysis of their experiences and to re-channel their current behaviour towards sustaining peace.

### **What can America do to help young people sustain peace in NI?**

Chair, in 2016, I was accepted onto a year-long programme that could change my life both personally and professionally, called the Washington Ireland Programme. As part of this initiative, I travelled with 30 of my classmates, all of whom came from different religious and political backgrounds to live and work in Washington DC.

During this time, I lived with an American host family and was employed by Senator John McCain. I was exposed to an entire spectrum of political beliefs, many of which differed from my own. I was immersed in a new culture and taught how to value diversity, how to engage in critical analysis, how to debate and reflect on my own values, beliefs and thought patterns. Most importantly, I learned how to disagree respectfully and without resentment.

This programme changed how I viewed myself and what might be possible for my future. I attribute much of my career success and entry in to political and leadership roles, to the lessons learned and mentorship I received while on this programme.

However, I am also acutely aware that I became a participant as a PhD student from a stable family background, good qualifications and the necessary resources to flourish in my future. I cannot help but think that if a programme such as this was designed, funded, and run exclusively for disenfranchised youth from disadvantaged areas across NI what the outcomes might be.

Secondly, I watched with enthusiasm, the testimony given by Professor Monica Mc Williams, Jane Morrice and the Honourable Mitchell Reiss. Each of whom made valuable contributions calling upon the reinstatement of the Civic Forum, the appointment of a US Envoy to Northern Ireland further investment in the legacy process and support for a new process to enable group transition away from paramilitarism. All of which I endorse and support.

However, if we are serious about supporting and enabling young people to sustain peace in NI, a new initiative should be created with the aim of giving voice to marginalised youth on issues, causes, consequences and potential solutions to the oppression they experience.

While NI currently has a Youth Forum and a Youth Parliament, such initiatives are rarely populated by those who have been involved in rioting, criminality or who have been school excluded. Nor do they have the resources to build the capacity of youth who have been marginalised from mainstream statutory services and democratic institutions.

For example, my own organisation, Politics in Action, exists to give young people in shared education a voice on current political and social issues which matter to them. We link young people to elected representatives, giving them a platform to make their voices heard and follow up to ensure their voices are given due weight. However, we do not and are not reaching those young people who voices have never been heard, nor are we operating in what I would classify the most disadvantaged and hardest to reach areas. This is something we aspire to do and are working towards, but in the meantime, the board and I are agreed that these are the young people who need our service the most because it is this catchment of young people who are the most oppressed, who are at the highest risk of being lured onto the streets and into violence and, it is these young people who are the least likely to want peace because from their perspective, they have never experienced the peace we have benefited from.

The United States brings a long track record of proven success in NI and has the ability to leverage outside resources and provide new ideas to help the parties, the two governments, and young people with the challenges I've mentioned above.

## Conclusion

And so, Chairman Keating, Ranking members and expert witnesses, in concluding, this hearing comes at an ideal time, when in a post-pandemic world, we are faced with an opportunity to build back better, to enhance the work of our previous leaders who, through the scaffolding of the GFA and on-going efforts to sustain peace in NI, have laid the foundations for young people to become the baton holders and play their own leading role in Northern Ireland.

With that in mind, my main contribution is that for peace to be sustained in NI and for young people to play a leading role, we need to first reach into the marginal spaces where excluded youth are stuck. We need to understand the world through their lens, listen to their lesser heard voices, treat their views with respect by adhering to the UNCRC and acting accordingly.

One way we can demonstrate our commitment is by designing a bespoke forum or initiative which will empower these marginalised young people to have a seat at the table and feed back to our cross Atlantic partners on their lived experiences and generate a deeper understanding of what peace would look and feel like for them.