

Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick and Representatives I want to begin by thanking you all for not only the opportunity to address you in this forum but also for your continued commitment to peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and for placing such importance on hearings like this to hear from Northern Irish people and collect our experience and perspective.

My name is Cormac Savage, I'm nineteen and I'm from a little town in County Down called Downpatrick – the final resting place of our patron saint and one of the first places he came when he arrived on our island. When I was 17, during the initial COVID lockdown, I set up the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland. It's an organisation that functions as a vehicle to give high school students aged 11-19 in Northern Ireland. We're a cross community organisation that chooses to view students as neither Catholic or protestant – nor unionist or nationalist – but simply students. We're diverse and we're exactly what form in my view reconciliation should take. We've fought for students on exams, the pandemic, mental health. We're entirely student led and student driven and the students who now lead the Union epitomise the best Northern Ireland has to offer.

A year ago, you heard from two exceptional women - both of whom I admire greatly – Professor Monica Mc Williams and Jane Morrice. Professor McWilliams and Ms Morrice often aren't given enough credit for the mountains they moved during the negotiations that led to the Good Friday agreement. They spoke to you at length about decommissioning after the agreement, but our hearing today is different – it's about young people and our voice. As a young person, Members of Congress, my view is that young people need you to stop talking about decommissioning guns and start talking about decommissioning mindsets.

The Good Friday agreement predates me. For many in our society the agreement marked the *end* of conflict - it was the cumulation of 30 years of toil by people like John Hume who fought to make it a reality. For my generation the Good Friday Agreement is not the end it is the beginning. I was born in 2003 – my experience of conflict is not the same as my parents. I am a peace baby – a child of post-conflict Ireland. We don't remember the bombs and bullets in the same way, we grew up in their shadow, free from the crossfire.

The work of peacebuilding has happened now our focus must be the challenge of reconciliation. A new approach is needed for the new generation of peace babies. One which ends division and segregation, one which educates us together and one which makes us one community instead of two. That is the purpose of the agreement to which I feel so attached and that the United States has done so much to support.

Much of the focus on Northern Ireland in Brexit has been because of the US commitment to protect the Good Friday Agreement but overlooked is a simple truth: the best way to protect the Good Friday Agreement is to implement it.

In April 2023 we will be 25 years since our new beginning and 25 years on we have had peace, but we have not had reconciliation. We have no Bill of Rights, the fight for Irish language rights goes on, our young people are still under a system of segregated education

and the victims of our conflict have still received no redress for what was inflicted upon them and their families.

The promise of a fully integrated society has not materialised, and the reality is that too many young people in Northern Ireland have grown up in only one sect of our community. I was 14 before I had a meaningful relationship with a protestant. Not because I was sheltered, not because I or my parents were sectarian, nor because there was any advantage to segregation. It was an accident of reality.

I went to publicly funded Catholic primary school until the age of 11, then to Catholic Secondary school until the age of 18. Sporting life revolved around the Gaelic Games, my town was 85% Catholic and outside of school I was in the scouts. In Northern Ireland scouting exists under two organisations – Scouting Ireland and the UK Scouts. There was simply never the opportunity to meet someone from the other central tradition. I'd met protestants through Shared education programmes with other schools, but they were stilted, and we didn't form *real* relationships.

When I was 14, I became a Member of our Youth Parliament. For the first time I was with young people from across our community and it changed my perspective. We didn't care whether we were catholic, protestant, neither or other – we were just all young people, working together as young people. We weren't reminded of our differences and asked to make friends in the name of peace – we were put together to work for common good and became friends because who we were politically and religiously did not matter.

That's what we need in Northern Ireland and that's what we did in the Secondary Students' Union – students working together irrespective and ignoring of our backgrounds but forming relationships based on what we had in common. We have more in common than divides us – let's reinforce that when we bring our young people together.

What Northern Ireland needs is a plan for integrated education – agreed by the parties and led by international experts in educational transformation. What we need is a Bill of Rights. What we need is a legacy plan that our victims feel compensated under. Ultimately – what we need is the Agreement we're discussing today implemented.

The United States has been a player on the island of Ireland in our social, economic and political development since our independence and so should it continue to be in Northern Ireland. If after our election May 5 we cannot broker a deal to restore government – the administration should offer an independent broker. Senator George Mitchell's masterful diplomacy shouldn't be a one off, it should be the staple American interaction with Northern Ireland.

If you want to protect the Good Friday Agreement, help us implement it. Give us the resources and the support we need to mainstream integrated education and pass a Bill of Rights.

For my generation that document wasn't the end of a conflict it's the start of a new society and a process of reconciliation. The United States helped us start on the path to peace, now, we need your help in reaching the final destination of reconciliation.

Representatives I wasn't to thank you for taking the time to hear our perspectives today and for your collective commitment to our peace process. I look forward to answering your questions. Thank you.