



**Testimony Submitted by the Honorable James F. McKay III  
on behalf of the Ancient Order of Hibernians  
before the U.S. Helsinki Commission  
Thursday, March 22, 2018**

The Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) is the oldest Irish Catholic fraternal organization in the United States, originally founded in 1836. Along with our sister organization, the Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians, we have over 80,000 members throughout the United States, and not just in places like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia – but in less obvious places as well, such as Butte, Montana; Los Angeles, California; and New Orleans, Louisiana. According to the most recent U.S. Census, there are an estimated 33.3 million people in the U.S. who claim Irish heritage.<sup>1</sup> The world figure is estimated to be around 70 million,<sup>2</sup> which means at least half of the Irish diaspora resides in the United States. In fact, we often hear it said around St. Patrick’s Day that there are only two kinds of people in the world – the Irish, and those who wish they were. Even though that’s just a joke, there is no question that for a country roughly the same size as the State of West Virginia, Americans do pay a great deal of attention to the Irish, and it is this connection between America and Ireland that organizations like the AOH continue to celebrate and foster.

Twenty years ago, a document that has come to be known as the Good Friday Agreement was signed by political representatives of the people of Northern Ireland and representatives of the British and Irish governments. This historic agreement brought an end to the violence of the Troubles, and introduced peace to a conflict where over 3,500 people had lost their lives in civil unrest, proportionately one of the deadliest in history.<sup>3</sup>

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1 U.S. Census Bureau ([http://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/13\\_1YR/B04003/0100000US](http://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/13_1YR/B04003/0100000US))  
2 “Global Irish: Ireland’s Diaspora Policy,” Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, March 2015.  
3 <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1hRidYe3-avd7gvl2WV1Y2B7QY6dKhkPS111kbFTnY/edit#gid=0>

One of the tenants of the AOH is a quote from Padrig Pearse which states, *“Ireland Unfree Shall Never Be At Peace.”* The Good Friday Agreement delivered peace only because it also promised freedom. The Good Friday Agreement promised freedom and reconciliation based on a parity of esteem for both sides of that divide. The successes of the Agreement to date have been achieved through hard work, the commitment by members of all the local communities who suffered tragedies during the Troubles, and by requiring considerable courage from political leaders who faced hard consequences from their constituencies in making any concessions.

Countless books and articles have been written on the topic of the Good Friday Agreement, and we have seen a number of recent celebrations of the 20-year milestone in both Ireland and the United States. And one of the topics that so many of us can all agree on is how important the United States was in securing this historic deal known as the Good Friday Agreement. The relationship between America and Ireland goes back to even before there was a United States. It was Ireland that first sent aid to struggling American colonies seeking their own independence. George Washington once described Ireland as, *“thou friend of my country in my country's most friendless days,”* and concluded with, *“May the God of Heaven...cause the sun of Freedom to shed its benign radiance on the Emerald Isle.”* While having Americans insert themselves into the politics and policies of Ireland was nothing new at the time, the commitment, leadership, and direct engagement shown by U.S. officials during this period was unprecedented. In fact, I am not entirely sure we would have even had a Good Friday Agreement, had it not been for the engagement of American officials like President Bill Clinton, Senator George Mitchell, Senator Ted Kennedy, Congressman Richie Neal, and Congressman Peter King – to name just a few, who refused to give up on a deal when tensions became too high or certain groups walked away from the negotiating table. These representatives of the American people helped build a bridge over the dark chasms of mistrusts, providing an impartial ear to the concerns of all parties and provided an incubator where the Good Friday Agreement, sometimes called the “Peace and Reconciliation Agreement” could be born.

This Good Friday Agreement, and subsequent agreements such as the St. Andrews Agreement in 2006, the Hillsborough Agreement in 2010, and the Stormont Agreement in 2014,

was anchored on the fundamental principles of basic human dignity and rights that are the foundation of our own government. The goals of the Good Friday Agreement were meant to give the future back to the people of Northern Ireland unshackled from the legacy of the past. For the first time in a very long time, simple things, like everyday grocery shopping, worshipping on Sundays, or taking family outings on holidays could be conducted without fear or trepidation. And during the past 20 years, a generation has grown up in Northern Ireland without knowing the fears and anxieties that constant violence inflicts upon communities.

Further, we have come to learn that peace brings prosperity. The economy in Northern Ireland has made significant advances since the Troubles, and despite setbacks from the global recession, the North of Ireland has seen a growth in tourism, a growth in foreign direct investment, and a commitment to increasing the private sector. In fact, Northern Ireland's Gross Domestic Product has grown slightly in the four quarters ending in September 2017, and the unemployment rate is currently 3.9 percent, which is lower than the UK average at 4.4 percent, the Irish average at 6.3 percent, and the EU average at 7.3 percent.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the gap in unemployment rates between members of the Catholic and Protestant community is near parity.

So while we recognize that great strides have been made in the last 20 years in all sectors, final peace has not yet been achieved in Northern Ireland. We praise the efforts of Senator George Mitchell and other subsequent envoys of the United States to Northern Ireland, and we praise the work of all the politicians on the ground in Northern Ireland who made the Good Friday Agreement a reality. However, the Good Friday Agreement was merely the beginning of a process aimed at creating a fair and equitable society for all the communities of the North of Ireland.

At an event just last week at the Library of Congress to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, in a pre-recorded message for attendees, President Clinton told the audience that there is still significant work to be done in the North of Ireland. He noted that the Good Friday Agreement is still not finished and he challenged all of us, "*seize this moment of memory to move into the future – together.*"<sup>5</sup> As President Clinton pointed out,

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<sup>4</sup> Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Northern Ireland Labour Market Report*, February 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Forum Marking the 20th Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement (3/13/17) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VC-RI0teG1s>)

there are still ongoing hurdles in Northern Ireland. These challenges exist at every level of civil society and address basic issues such as dealing with the past with justice and respecting the history and culture of all communities with mutual respect and parity of esteem. These are difficult and tough discussions to be had, but these are conversations that must take place.

The Ancient Order of Hibernians agrees with President Clinton; we believe the time is now for the United States to recommit itself to the principles of the Good Friday Agreement. In fact, the AOH has repeatedly requested that this Administration fulfill its commitment to appoint a Special Envoy to Northern Ireland immediately. This is an extremely critical time for Northern Ireland, and as political parties continue to attempt to form a sustainable government while addressing the fears and anxieties of Brexit, we believe that America must reaffirm through the presence of a Special Envoy that the peace and well-being of the community of the North of Ireland is still a priority to the U.S., and America is willing to walk with the representatives of those communities on the road to a lasting peace.

I believe that it is important to note that the Ancient Order of Hibernians in America has been and will be in the future, working for the unification of Ireland. The Preamble of our AOH Constitution states that the purpose of our Organization is to promote:

*Friendship, Unity and Christian Charity: and to aid and advance by all legitimate means the aspirations and endeavors of the Irish people for complete and absolute independence providing peace and unity for all Ireland.*

That being said, we understand that this cannot be accomplished overnight and complete independence can only be achieved when a majority of people on both sides of the border wish it to happen.

For over 30 years, the Ancient Order of Hibernians has been engaged with a variety of organizations in the North of Ireland, and poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into organizations that provide assistance for charities and agencies to aid and advance, by all legitimate means, the aspirations and endeavors of the Irish people. We in our own way continue on the efforts of successive U.S. envoys to bridge the gaps of ignorance and mistrust. Our donations sent to Northern Ireland each year go to cross-appeal organizations such as Holy Cross

Trust of Ardoyne, Belfast, Omagh Community Youth Choir, St. Patrick's Centre, Downpatrick, and Conway Mill Trust Inc., just to name a few.

Additionally, the AOH supports the promotion of the Irish language in Ireland, which has garnered much media attention as a cause, but not the only one, for the failure to restore the power sharing government in the North of Ireland. It is incredulous that anyone would have an objection to the Irish language being taught and used in Ireland. We note that acts supporting and promoting indigenous languages in other parts of the United Kingdom, specifically Scotland and Wales, have long been enacted. The Irish language is one of the ten oldest languages still spoken in the world today; it is a treasure that all communities of Ireland should be proud of. To those who ask if the study of language should be a barrier to forming a government, we respond that if something as benign as the promotion of the Irish language cannot be resolved, then what hope is there to address more contentious issues. We believe that these issues of identity should always be on the table for discussion and can be addressed better if an impartial outsider, like an American Envoy, chairs the discussions.

Finally, one of the many other groups that we support monetarily on an annual basis is Relatives for Justice, which works for truth and justice for victims and survivors of victims during the Troubles. Utilizing a third party, in this case, the U.S. Envoy, to help address some of these "legacy issues" is critical to finding a path forward. For example, the Stormont Agreement was signed in 2014 and created agencies such as the IRG (The Implementation and Reconciliation Group), the OHA (Oral History Archive), the ICIR (The Independent Commission on Information Retrieval) and the HIU (Historical Investigative Unit). These agencies were created to address human rights violations of the past and to attempt to achieve some type of closure and justice when possible. Not all of these agencies have gone into full effect yet because although the Good Friday Agreement has been enabled, it has not been fully implemented. The AOH believes the many legacy issues should be handled with a third-party negotiator involved to give credibility to the impartiality and transparency of the process.

In addition to addressing legacy issues, the people of Northern Ireland are now forced to deal with concerns surrounding Brexit and how Northern Ireland may be impacted. After the

Good Friday Agreement was initially implemented in 1998, not only was the “hard border” of military checkpoints and concertina wire demolished, but also the psychological borders that separated two people on a tiny island. All that was left was the memory of those trying days trying to get back and forth across the border. Today, the local people of Northern Ireland can cross the border multiple times in any given day – for work, for school, for shopping – for life.

The dissolution of UK’s membership in the European Union has once again raised the specter of a “hard border” in which all affected communities are in rare unanimity. Yet, no feasible, detailed means of avoiding a “hard border” have yet been identified. Much has been made of “commitments” and “desires” to avoid a hard border, but the devil is in the details. To avoid the disastrous consequences of a hard border in Ireland, compromises will be needed by all parties. The AOH believes this is yet another excellent reason to appoint a Special Envoy to Northern Ireland who can impartially facilitate finding common ground and begin to exhibit trust in carving out the future.

If the current demographics of Northern Ireland at 48 percent Protestant and 45 percent Catholic continue<sup>6</sup>, this trend would indicate a Catholic majority in five to ten years, or perhaps even less. In attempting to obtain reconciliation and justice, these figures cannot be ignored. The majority of today can become the minority of tomorrow and the blanket of protections enacted today will equally cover those who may feel they do not need them today. There is no question that Senator Mitchell, who forged this Agreement 20 years ago, knew of these facts when he espoused them during his mediations in 1998, which is why it is so crucial to find an equitable path forward for all parties.

Certainly one of the most well respected members of government from the Nationalist side was Martin McGuinness. In fact, I don’t think most people recognized his stature until after his death. What he believed in has been reduced by some of our Irish organizations in this country, the AOH included, to four basic principles: those of self-determination, respect, equality and truth.

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<sup>6</sup> “Two tribes: A divided Northern Ireland,” The Irish Times (4/1/2017) (<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/two-tribes-a-divided-northern-ireland-1.3030921>)

**(1) SELF-DETERMINATION**

A BORDER POLL TO AFFIRM IRISH SELF-DETERMINATION

*"The imposition of Brexit, despite the vote of the people of the north to remain (in the European Union) underlines the undemocratic nature of partition... There is a democratic imperative to provide Irish citizens with the right to vote in a Border poll to end partition and retain a role in the EU."*

*"A border poll is part of the process of building a modern and dynamic New Republic on this island - an agreed Ireland achieved by peaceful and democratic means."*

*- Martin McGuinness.*

**(2) RESPECT**

FULL STATUTORY EQUALITY FOR THE IRISH LANGUAGE

*"Successive British Governments ...have totally failed to meet their obligations... to protect the rights of the Irish language community."*

*-Martin McGuinness*

**(3) EQUALITY**

THE ENACTMENT OF A BILL OF RIGHTS

*'We have pressed consistently for, the establishment of a Bill of Rights in the North and an all-Ireland Charter of Rights.'*

*-Martin McGuinness*

**(4) TRUTH**

EQUAL JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS OF THE CONFLICT AND THEIR FAMILIES

*"Dealing with the legacy of the past remains one of the key outstanding challenges of our peace process. Unless it is dealt with in a comprehensive manner then the essential process of healing and reconciliation cannot gain momentum."*

*-Martin McGuinness*

The Ancient Order of Hibernians in America fully support these espoused principles and believe that they are in keeping with the best values of our organization, i.e., Truth, Respect, Equality, and Self-Determination. Only God knows the future for Ireland and we can only continue to do what we have done in the past, and that is to support the efforts and principles of the Good Friday Agreement and continue to spread the word to all who will listen of the achievements that have been made to date.