Peace in Action: Episode 6 – Northern Ireland

“There was a thirst amongst women particularly, to end this violence. Enough is enough. And that leads me to the point of tragedy and when you got to a precipice and think ‘is that how you want to live.’ And that came. 28 people were killed in a period of two weeks. Very close to me and people I knew. And people really stood back and said: “This could end up with an eye until we’re all blind.”

“History says: ‘Don’t hope on this side of the grave / But then, once in a lifetime the longed-for tidal wave / Of justice can rise up and hope and history rhyme’. And it’s the history of grievance being turned into some hope for a better future which he way trying to capture in those lines, and I think they’re very powerful.

Welcome to the Peace in Action podcast from Conciliation Resources. I’m Jonathan Cohen, Executive Director of Conciliation Resources. In this series to mark our 30th anniversary, I’ll be talking with some of the people involved in the diverse work of peacebuilding around the world. We’ll hear stories from a range of guest speakers and uncover how dialogue and mediation support can help to create more peaceful societies and bridge divides.

Jonathan Cohen: It's a great pleasure to be here in Belfast today. Over the years, Conciliation Resources has brought many groups from different conflict regions to Northern Ireland to learn from the transition from violence to politics as a way to deal with the conflict. We brought groups from the Philippines, from Georgia and Abkhazia, from Papua New Guinea, Ethiopia, Kashmir, so quite a lot. And what we want to focus on in this episode of Peace in Action is why Northern Ireland's experience is so important to other peace processes.

Joining us today are Monica McWilliams and Clem McCartney. Welcome to you both. It's really lovely to see you.

Clem McCartney: Thank you.

Monica McWilliams: Thank you.

JC: You've both been immersed in the peace process for quite some time now, and you've also been great collaborators and supporters of Conciliation Resources and many other peacebuilding organisations. And you've worked to help us bring people from other conflicts to learn from Northern Ireland's struggle to emerge from the conflict that killed more than three and a half thousand people in a period from the late 1960s to late 1990s.

Monica, it's almost 27 years to the day since you actually signed the peace agreement that symbolically brought an end to “The Troubles,” as they were called. And at that time, you were one of the founders of the Women's Coalition, and since you've played an important role in a number of different positions in the implementation of the peace agreement.

And Clem, great to have you here as well. You've been an associate of Conciliation Resources for many years, facilitating a lot of the groups we've brought, and you've also worked with us in contexts from the South Caucasus to South Sudan, as well as on some of our futures thinking work. So tremendous expertise and experience between the two of you, and two people who have really helped a lot of people understand the experience of the conflict here in Northern Ireland.

To get started, what I'd really love to hear is how you both got involved in the in the peace process. What was your entry point in your own experience of contributing to the process of peace in Northern Ireland? And perhaps we could start with you, Monica.

MM: It goes back a long time, more than 50 years. When I was a very young girl, actually a student at school. My whole family got involved in the civil rights marches, and at that time we thought it would end very quickly. The marches were for one man, one vote. As a woman later in life, I had to laugh at the fact that we carried placards that should have said one person, one vote. So, it was about the franchise equally, because there was a lot of gerrymandering. And if you didn't own property, you didn't have a vote, and Catholics mostly didn't own property. But it was also about discrimination and employment, and also the policing of Northern Ireland at that time. The Unionists had the monopoly.

So really, I consider my trajectory as being from civil rights, then to women's rights and finally to human rights, which led me to the peace agreement.

I'd been involved in the women's rights movement for decades, since the 70s, and violence against women and girls through Women's Aid, and that wasn't an issue that was covered much as it is never covered in terms of conflict. It's what happens on the streets, rather than behind closed doors. So, I did a lot of research on that and showed that where the place was awash with weapons that they were being used against partners in their own home. Perpetrators were using them for illegal means in all kinds of ways, but also those who had legal weapons. And that struck people, and they were quite shocked at that. So, it was an issue for me that connected me with women in other conflicts, but also here.

JC: Clem perhaps you can share how you became involved.

CM: Well, I go right back to the previous IRA campaign in the 1950s. I remember, you know, being stopped by the ‘B Specials’, as they were called in those days, and wanting to search your car. Police stations with sandbags around the outside. But really it was all like a million miles from me in terms of my everyday life. And then I got a job overseas. And when I went to start my job overseas, I met my new boss, where the luggage was coming off the carousel, and to pass the time, he said, “I understand you've got tribal fighting in your country”, which wasn't quite the word I would use for it. He says, “We've got tribal fighting as well, and we'll have you as our expert in tribal fighting”. It was a bit of a shock, but it made me start thinking about the Northern Ireland conflict in a different way as to, how would you describe it to someone else? So, I began to rethink the Northern Ireland conflict as how the dynamics were, patterns that

happen when you have people who disagree with each other. And so I came back and I decided to get involved, but I couldn't find a party or a group that I could really identify with, so I became this kind of quiet person working in the background and continued to do that right through.

JC: Monica, perhaps you could give us a very quick snippet of your sense of the context of how this conflict evolved?

MM: So it wasn't just civil rights of course but actually it was also about identity, political identity and that became the running sore. But back then, it was the fact that there were those who believed, and hence, Clem has referred to earlier campaigns about the unification of the island, which was partitioned in 1922. So there were those in the minority side who thought, even if you were given those rights, there was still an identity issue there, that Ireland should be united. On the other side, there were those who said "We have parity with the United Kingdom, and that there's a consensus. We are the majority and, as long as we are, we should remain with the United Kingdom." And unfortunately, what was a very peaceful protest demanding very simple rights now, when you look back, it turned into very violent campaigns, because those who believed that you could fight for your ethnic identity or political identity through militant means, and one side believed that the British government were not going to give an inch on the identity issue, and the other side believed they'd given too much.

And the word paramilitary comes from the loyalist side, who believed that they should sign up because they believed that the British military weren't doing enough, that the police weren't hard enough, and that they thought that they should be the militants and the combatants, and they ideologically believed they were defenders.

On the other side, there were those, the Republicans as we know them, who felt that it was only militant means that would force the hand of the British government. When someone like me, who was very young as a teenager and went on those peaceful protests, I still recall being on Magilligan Beach with sand, when CS gas and rubber bullets was opened, and the following Sunday, it was live bullets. I remember thinking, why is the repressive apparatus being used in this way against people who have nothing in their hands except sand. And that was a lesson for other conflicts that - listen to what people are saying and don't respond with very militant means, which justified those who saw that happening for taking up militancy. What changed everything as someone who was involved in the peace agreement many years later was that we had to resolve our differences through political means and not militarily.

JC: But what we want to look at is the peace process from the perspective of how it's served to help other people learn about their own peace processes, in a way, how Northern Ireland has served as a lens through which people can look at their own experiences. So, I wonder, from that perspective, if we can turn to - on the basis of this years of enmity and violence and death and degradation - what was it that actually made peace possible? It's often said that peace is impossible until it suddenly is possible. What was it that transformed the situation here?

MM: For me, there were a lot of factors involved. There were back channels, which is really important. People talking to people that they were pretending they weren't speaking to, at governmental level, but also at church level, faith community, and not very far from here, in the monastery. Two of the political leaders, John Hume and Gerry Adams, were asked by the priests in that monastery to come together quietly under the radar. As I said, the women's movement had been working together on issues that no one would have ever said, “Are you a Catholic or a Protestant?” When you have been sexually assaulted or abused. And under the roof of a refuge, you had policemen's wives, IRA men's wives, soldiers' wives. And it was quite remarkable. I remember driving a bus to Corrymeela, which is one of the centres, one of the few neutral peace centres in Northern Ireland, back then in the early 80s, and the conversations were incredible about what was common across the binary of religion and political identity. And so, there was a thirst amongst women, particularly, to end this violence, enough as enough, trade union movement, different people, and that leads me to the point of tragedy. And when you go to a precipice, and you think, is that how you want to live? And that came in ‘94 I remember 28 people were killed in a period of two weeks, very close to me, and people I knew, and people really stood back and said: “This could end up with an eye, until we're all blind.” And so the tragedies, the back channels, the talks, but also economic warfare. The IRA started taking their war to England, and it was very costly, and the British government were - which is actually very interesting in terms of what's happening currently in the Middle East - were saying this is costing a lot economically, and that brought government to the table. And there were many, many issues of the third parties getting involved, and the European Union, and likewise, with President Clinton was really a catalyst, also, after the ceasefires, taking a huge risk that both the British and the Irish parliament weren't happy about, our respective Prime Ministers, that President Clinton would give a visa to someone that was called a terrorist to come for 24 hours. But that's another factor. He had to convince the diaspora. And diasporas play a big role in conflicts, in either keeping them going or funding them. And so that came into play.

You know, it's funny, the stars were aligned at that particular moment, the circumstances were really starting to be set on the table in a way that they never had before with so many failed negotiations. And when I looked at the table, when I first went in and sat down at the peace talks, and I thought, we will never get an opportunity like this again, because right at the top of the table were the two governments represented by Prime Ministers and foreign ministers in those first weeks, third party chairs from America, Finland and Canada, an inclusive process around the table that involved the combatants on both sides, as well as constitutional parties and ourselves from civil society. And I thought that day, the very first day, “We have the factors here now that we never had before to make this work.” So, when it comes together like that, and I wouldn't have predicted in that day two years later that we were going to make it, but there were so many things that had happened that people had an appetite now to say this is our last chance.

JC: We'll come back to some of that in more detail, but thank you. Clem I wonder if you wanted any additional points on how you saw peace being made possible.

CM: I think it was a long transition, so we'd had to change the way we thought about things. And there was a lot of things, as Monica says, happening around us, which influenced the thinking of all the different parties. But in the early days, we very much saw things as a zero-sum game. It's "we have to get what we want, and we don't want to give the other side what they want, because that will take away from us." So, we had a long period of time with people arguing about what was an acceptable basis for having talks rather than saying "Let's have talks, and then work out what it is we want to talk about and what we want to deal with." And so, there was that process until the point at which the parties said, "The chances are we'll do better by being willing to sit down and talk to each other than by continuing with the war." And not all parties reached that stage. Some were very reluctant. But once we had enough parties around the table, one or two other parties who were only half in and half out realised they couldn't stay completely out. So that was - as well as all the things that were happening outside - there was a change in thinking from zero-sum to partial to actually, we have to have everybody there to try and work out what will be a solution.

JC: And were there moments when you thought the process might fail completely?

MM: I'm not sure that I ever thought that it would fail completely, but it would stumble - fall down seven times you get up eight. And I guess I again, came from the coalition encouraging the other parties to stay at the table. They say women are prima donnas. The only prima donnas I saw at the table were those that were jumping up and threatening and saying they weren't coming back. But we said, we're here, and we've got to make this work. Yes, there were moments, and I've always said that it's also incredible, the Northern Ireland peace process, none of the leaders were assassinated, and many of them sitting beside me from the armed groups, often said "If we're going to be killed, we'll be killed by someone on our own side." And that's the fear that you cannot satisfy your own side. You'll be called a traitor or collaborator or treacherous for negotiating with the other side. But that's the strength of negotiations.

There was a moment when one of the armed groups affiliated to a political party, the ADP, asked us to go into the prison. And we went into the prison and met some seriously dangerous guys because they weren't in there for nothing. And they said, "We're telling our political representatives to leave the table." And I thought, that's not very smart. So, I said to them, "Listen, let me tell you something about what they're doing." And we went through it, about how serious their representatives were, and that they were bringing a voice of loyalism, and particularly the class issue, to the table that no one else, other than their representatives, could do. So that was an important moment.

There was another moment when I went over to speak to the Republicans not very far from here on the Falls Road, and there had been a murder of two police officers in '97 during the talks. And we thought, are they serious about coming in because Sinn Fein weren't at the table, When I came back into the peace talks, the leaders of the loyalist Progressive Unionist Party came to me and said, "We're so disturbed by this murder, these murders, we don't think they're serious.

We're going to leave, or we're talking about leaving. Will you come in and speak to our comrades?" I didn't realise actually how serious their discussions had been, and they were ready to walk. So, I said, "Listen, here's the story. These guys have serious problems on their own side. They're not authorising these murders, or if they are, they certainly don't want them to be happening, because it is wrecking the whole process." We didn't know at that stage the extent to which there had been people against the IRA being involved in the talks and who were carrying out these actions. The other side, in terms of the unionist side and the loyalist side, saw them all as one, but actually, in every conflict there's fractures, and the fractures were already opening up. And so, I kind of gave that analysis to the Loyalists, and they turned around and said, "We understand that, because exactly the same thing is happening on our side," and they were facing serious problems from spoilers on their own side, who some were agents provocateurs.

That's the same in other conflicts, and watching it now in Middle East, and it's a very dangerous phenomena if it enters the room. But you know what? You need people who can break down those rumours and those lies and talk to people that nobody else is talking to, to get the facts and to stop the misinformation. And as a result, everybody stayed at the table. And there could have been those moments when the very important people who are party to the problem, needed to be party to the solution, and they stayed.

JC: And what's interesting Monica is the way you're describing it is: a peace process is the accumulation of multiple contributions and steps, some of them quite invisible, and yet, Clem, it's often perceived that what's critical for a peace process is the way in which it's designed, and that the design of a process is key to its success. I know you're quite sceptical about the notion of the way a peace process is designed, so what do you think was learned here about how that happened?

CM: Yeah, I am sceptical, because I often hear people talk about, "We have to design a process" and then get the people to involve themselves in it", but the process has to be an arrangement which suits the people.

There was constraints which each party had, some of which have already been just mentioned by Monica, so how can we manage these constraints? There's a constraint about people wanting rid of the guns. There's a constraint about other people can't give up their guns. So, what is a system we can have, sometimes a bit of a fudge. Then we had in our case, the Mitchell principles, which was what we do about the guns. And so the guns didn't disappear and they didn't, but they weren't used, or most of them weren't used. There was the thing about consent. You know, "Who has to consent to this?" And it was clear that everybody had to consent to it, because everybody was a spoiler and a potentially party that could destroy the thing. There was the idea that John Hume often talked about it, there is no agreement until it's all agreed. So, we could work in an agreement. But we knew that if someone got some benefit here, someone else needed something to counterbalance that. So, if we had arrangements about the government of Northern Ireland, and that there would be a system which was based

on having a government of Northern Ireland, those who wanted a united Ireland had some security about that wouldn't be the end of the story. So, they might say, “Well, we'll agree to that, but we also want to have provisions in here about what will work for us.” So, and all ideas had to be on the table that you could argue for anything. And many people wanted to say, “No, we're not talking about united Ireland.” But why should Republicans come to the table if they couldn't talk about united Ireland? So that was a legitimate thing.

We often talked about … Mitchell's approach was negotiation by boredom. He let everybody talk about whatever it is they wanted to talk about. And you'd wonder if he'd fallen asleep or not. And then the person would eventually finish and sit down, and he would say, “Thank you very much. Mr Adams, Thank you very much, Mr Paisley.” And then he’d turn to the next person, he wouldn't comment on what they would say, but they had a chance to have their voice, and they had a chance to express the things that were important to them, and not necessarily everybody listened to them, but it was on the record that this was something that was important for them, and it was dealt with.

So, we have, if you like, an organically developing process which had a number of principles around it, which was the way in which the mechanisms were made to be able to be worked. And that, I think, is a lesson. I think we have to take to other places. Can I just say Monica mentioned the Downing Street declaration. and that was a framework agreement. I get very aggrieved when I look at a lot of the conflicts were happening today, and there's no talk about, how do you set out what is of interest to all the different parties, and that's what those two statements did. And I think they're fundamental in virtually every conflict. We need to say, “This is what this party wants. This is what this party wants. Now here's an arrangement whereby we can start to have negotiations about how to balance those different interests,”

JC: And we get an awful lot of drawing red lines in the sand and not allowing a process to adapt.

CM: We did as well, but we had to learn not to.

JC: Yeah Monica?

MM: I think it was important the design. You have to be imaginative. Now, the governments were imaginative enough to know that they needed the armed groups at the table, and when we saw that, we immediately were imaginative enough to know that could be the door to get the women's coalition in through the door, because it was a different electoral process than anything we ever had. It was a list system. We only ever have people standing in constituencies. Well, this list system means that you had some protection around you, and that was good.

JC: So, I think what you're getting at is this crucial, as you said, inclusion, but also the agency of the communities that are affected. And one of the ways in which that agency in Northern Ireland came to bear was through civil society. The Women's Coalition was a critical dimension of that.

MM: Formal peace talks are not really still interested that much in civil society, despite the UN Security Council Resolution that mandates on women, peace and security, that all negotiations give some thought to, including women. It's still not successful, nor even since. We had a civic forum that was proposed in the peace agreement, it's never been established. It was established for a short period stood down once the parties decided that they had enough governance structures, they didn't need it. So, I think a lot is made of the importance of civil society, and we who work in civil society know that.

It does have to be bottom up. So that is a very important point, because people then, when they get in, they broaden the agenda.

Because Clem has argued about the hardware, as I call it, “The guns - let them rust in peace.” was what we said. When there was all these conditions that they had to give the guns up before, give them up during, or in parallel. I was involved in all of that, and, you know, the restructuring of security forces.

But what does civil society do? They broaden the agenda. And I keep reminding people, had we not been at that table, there would not have been issues in that peace agreement on having the Civic Forum, on integrated education, on shared housing, on what we would do for the next generation of young people, and, most importantly, on victims.

CM: When the talks were organised, each party had its own room, and if you walked around the corridors between the room, there was hardly anybody there. But you would almost always meet a member of the Woman's Coalition with a piece of paper in her hand, and she would be saying, “We've just drafted this, and we're going to other parties to see what they think of it,” whereas the other parties were sitting in the rooms waiting for someone to tell them what was happening, but not really trying to think about how they could advance the process.

JC: People were trying to hold on to their positions. Were reluctant to give up. And it's, I think, one of the lessons for so many processes. How do you navigate that dimension of compromise where you're prepared to step back from your maximal demand in order to help the other side, help you reap something that will be in your interest?

MM: You have no idea how much that was a problem. Well, nothing was agreed until everything was agreed. So, I want to see what you've agreed. But if I show you, will you show me?

George Mitchell set us homework. I call it George Mitchell's homework because it felt to us like that when he would ask questions. We had assumed that everybody else was handing it into him, and so we would sit around our kitchen table at night and prepare the answers or do our homework as you do as good students, and give it to him. And he'd say, “Thanks very much. You're the only people that have given me that.” I would go “What? “, and then I realised the rest, pardon the kind of pun, but they were keeping their powder dry because it was too early to be putting down what was going to become on the table when the dominoes started falling.

JC: Do you think in a way, there was a certain naivety to the Women's Coalition? You just wanted to do business. You wanted to get on with things, and you weren't part of the artifice. And by doing that, you actually brought a different quality to the negotiations.

MM: I don't know if it was naivety or just hard work. It was how we worked. Prepare, prepare, prepare.

JC: But naivety in the sense that you didn't get into the politics of the negotiation, the politics of the process between these big men who were strutting their position.

MM: We did. We did. We did. Jonathan, it would be wrong to say that we weren't equally had so many of our own demands to the point where parties got fed up with us, and told us, you know, “Look, you can get that, but you're not going to get this.” And we always had to remind ourselves we are negotiators. And I say that to other women who I am involved with in other situations. Don't ever forget you have your own demands.

But yes, you're maybe right in that, in our naivety, we thought, and it worked for us, that the other parties would speak to us, because they started slowly to take us seriously. Was that the reason, or was it: “Well, they’re just the woman issues. It doesn't really matter that we're seen to talk to them?”

CM: But looking at the woman's movement as a whole from the outside they had spent years discussing engaging with each other trying to think of ways of resolving issues and how to get things move forward. So they brought that expertise and that experience into the touch the parties. The political parties that spent more time trying to hold on say that they already had, and they weren't so ready to have… they weren't experienced at kind of real, open discussion as opposed to bargaining. But I think the women's movement had always understood that you need negotiation, not bargaining, or you can have bargaining, but it's not enough. So, I think they came with a different perspective from a party which is trying to win votes.

MM: So civil society widens the agenda, and that's really important, because had we gone, which we had to do to the people after the peace agreement, for those six weeks, we were out campaigning every day and night, asking people to say “Yes.”

JC: For the referendum.

MM: For the referendum, because that was part of the agreement. And when I knocked doors, people say, this is a terrorist charter. And I'd say, “What do you mean?” And they'd say, “Well, you're letting prisoners out, and you're emasculating our police, and you're doing this and army back to barracks.” I'd say “there's a section in here on victims and reconciliation and on the needs of victims.” Now, I wish it had been stronger, because we've got it in at a very late stage, but the moral of the story is we got it in. So don't come crying afterwards about what you wished you had in: get it in when you get the chance. And that's what civil society does. It broadened that agenda, made the conflict more nuanced in that we did have British or Irish or both, and made people understand that there needed to be human rights and equality issues.

So those are the two pieces of the design, make the process inclusive and make the substance comprehensive, so that the ownership goes back to the people. If the people don't see themselves in that agreement, then they're going to say, “Well, what's the point? What's in it for us?” And the agreement, I believe, is still the agreement. That's the only thing that people ever voted on in this country.

And when we were out with our kitchen ladders putting our posters up, and we couldn't afford to buy much material for the referendum, because it was all at your own cost, it was a colorful campaign. There was a little the civil society campaign. The stratagem was a yes meant the road straight ahead, and a no was a dead end, and it was a simple poster. I remember one of our crowd, we had to tell them “Quick what you've just done as illegal get that down!” the red lights, the stoplights, and then the amber and the green. But the green… they had covered every green on Yes, and every red on No! And needless to say, the roads authority phoned us up and said, “Can you tell everybody that's done that on your traffic lights to take those down?” But the work that went into that campaign, it worried me. Actually. I thought we were going to lose it.

Because I was really shocked when I looked around in all these working-class estates and everywhere, the parties weren't there. And I said, “Where the heck are the parties that signed the agreement?” They were back preparing for government. And I said, “well, there will be no government if we don't get people to say yes.” Now, parties dispute that when I say it, but I know because we had everybody out on the streets and villages and all around the towns. But I'll tell you who was out: those loyalist parties, and I was very proud of them. When we went back to collect our cardboard and our stuff because we needed it then to stand for election to the assembly, and we were recycling. Who was out, taking down all our stuff? The parties that hadn't bothered to come out to fight for the referendum. They were literally stealing our material in order to put it up for them to get elected into the assembly! And they did, but it was a lesson about how power works.

JC: Messy, but real?

MM: Yeah, the power was more important than peace.

You’re listening to the Peace in Action podcast from Conciliation Resources. You can find more from this series on Spotify and on our website at www.c-r.org

MM: But let me bring you to the final point on consent, and I'm talking consensus here. When Clem refers to voting, we did not majority vote around the table. We did not have unanimous voting around the table.

What we saw was a South African concept of sufficiency of consensus. When we first looked at it, we said that just means the big Unionist Party and the big Nationalist Party, and it doesn't involve the other eight or nine parties around the table. So we asked them to amend it to a sufficiency of consensus that involved all the others around the table, but nobody could exercise a veto, because we actually knew that there were two parties at that table who would eventually

walk, or may walk or would never vote, unless with the rest of us. And that was the absolute thing that held the agreement up, because when the leader of the Ulster Unionists, David Trimble, was in trouble, he was able to turn to the loyalist parties and say, “Are you with me on this? Because I need a sufficiency of consensus. I need your consensus to buy into this.” And likewise, the rest of us gave him, and others who had from time to time, had a lot of problems in agreeing to things that were on the table. And we said: “Here it is, quid pro quo, sufficiency of consensus.” And I'm very proud of that concept to this day, I think, because it makes us all think when we go, like Brexit, into a referendum that asks you to tick some box, “Is there a sufficiency of consensus? Do people know what they're doing. Have they got options? What would be their preference?” And so again, the design was about, “You might want an awful lot, but you're not going to get it. There'll be pain in this, but there'll be gain.” And so we were all told by the chair, Senator Mitchell that we could have something in the agreement that belonged just to you, the imprimatur, as he called it, and so that was also part of the design, and it really gave ownership to everyone at the table, because the parties needed to go out to their own constituents and say, “Look, I managed to achieve this.”

JC: Clem, how does that sit with you in relation to the design? Because it was such a messy process, and yet it was, there was a coherence to it.

CM: Yeah, I mean, I was actually meaning that it was a consent… when I say consensus, I meant that no, that no majority could say this is what we want. I wasn't sort of talking about any group being able to outvote the others. They had to work out a way to bring as many people as possible around a common solution.

MM: Isn't it interesting? It came from South Africa, and that's the point that I would add, “Learn from others.” And we hadn't a clue that South Africa had sat down and thought through that sufficiency of consensus, because Mandela needed all of the chiefs in South Africa from all the various areas to buy in. And so, he was the one who designed the idea of sufficiency of consensus. And I think that's important for us to learn from each other.

CM: So, there was an element in their concept, which was not everybody would go along with it, but if enough went along with it, then it could be accepted as a way it would be to go forward. And so in our case, the DUP, for example, left itself rather out on a limb and didn't really buy into it. It created problems for us since.

MM: But we knew they would. We knew at the table that they would leave, and yet we also knew there was enough Loyalists and Unionists left at the table to have enough people who would eventually vote for the agreement. And so that was, it was a really important, and it's important for other negotiations to understand that. You are going to have people go and leave, and you're going to have to work to get them back again, which we did. And of course, in every conflict that I've been involved in, in Colombia and elsewhere. You work hard to get people, buy them back in and they do come back.

My father was a farmer, and he used to say to me, don't run after the stray sheep. You're only getting distracted. Stay with the flock and make sure that stray one knows where you're going. And that, I thought, stuck with me during the talks, because I could see the strays eventually coming back in.

JC: And the question is, what they're prepared to do when they walk away? Are they prepared to disrupt? And there were plenty of people who were trying to disrupt, or are they just frustrated and they'll disengage but not prevent the process from moving forward.

CM: There was one thing that I think went wrong with our process towards the end, which was some of the leaders, began to go off and see Tony Blair in private. Mo Mowlam did a great job, and we have to respect what she did. George Mitchell did a good job, but it was a very inclusive job. But getting towards the end, some of the people, the Unionists, weren't happy with what was happening. They went to see Tony Blair at Downing Street, and he said, "Yes, we'll make a few concessions for you." It wasn't discussed in the forum.

MM: So what does that tell you? It tells you that leadership, personalities, chemistry is everything, and that's one thing we haven't spoken about. You can talk about substance and comprehensive agreements, but if people don't get along, and if you start throwing people out into the cold and making them feel that they're out in the cold, then you have trouble. And we did have trouble afterwards.

JC: Can I turn to one of the really difficult issues that Northern Ireland experienced during the process of… the during the conflict, during the process of peace, and continues to experience today, which is a really thorny relationship between peace and justice. And Clem, I'm reminded of some very beautiful poetry that you used in an article you wrote for the Accord some 20 years ago. And I wonder if you could share the lines that used back then as a way of entering into the peace and justice relationship.

CM: I know the lines that you mean, but let me first of all say something about the background to those lines, because they come from a play by Seamus Heaney, which is The Cure at Troy. Now, the play was about one of the leaders of the Athenians, Philoctetes, who had been abandoned by his own people at an early stage in the war, and he was marooned on an island, and left to fester there for a number of years. He was an archer. And then they went to the Oracle and the Oracle said, "you need his bow in order to win the war." And so they had to eat humble pie, and they had to go and see him. And he's bitter, aggrieved. And so the play is about, what do they do? How do they get him on side, and how do they get basically, all they want is this bow, but they need him in order to get his bow. And so, the play is around that, and there's lines in it which are: "History says, 'Don't hope on this side of the grave / But then once in a lifetime, the long fort tidal wave / Of justice can rise up and hope and history rhyme'."

The idea that he was capturing in the play, and in that line, what they had to find a way to deal with the injustice and the grievance of Philoctetes in order for him to come on board. And they had to recognise his grievance. They had to recognise they had wronged him, and they had to

recognise the injustices. And when they did that, then they got the bow. And it's the history of grievance being turned into some hope for a better future, which he was trying to capture in those lines. And I think they're very powerful.

JC: So I mean, Monica, how do you then transpose that, those beautiful words of poetry into the prose of what has actually been experienced and how Northern Ireland has dealt with that tension between peace and justice. And you served as the chair of the commission of human rights, so deeply immersed in this.

MM: Yeah, and I've always said the people who sacrificed the most in Northern Ireland, because I work with them very closely through Wave, which is the trauma centre for the victims of the conflict: that those people who sacrifice so much are the people who gave the most. And it starts with that: no reoccurrence of the conflict. But it's taken us years to meet their needs, and why has that been the case? Many of them felt that as soon as the agreement was over and the lovely words that were in it were just words on paper, and so we weren't very good at implementing what we agreed and what we promised.

So it's taken us this last 27 years, slowly, slowly, piece by piece, to deliver it. First it was reparations and compensation and pensions for the injured. And it was civil society again, who raised that issue - those who were inside the victims' groups, and that's finally come through. And many, many other pieces of the process - inquiries in order to get accountability. That never comes immediately. It takes a long time, and some of these inquiries are only happening now.

On Sunday, I went to St Patrick's Cathedral in Armagh, and I've been doing it for 20 years on Palm Sunday, where the families that disappeared gather, and they pass the candle to each other, those who have had the bodies returned for a Christian burial, and those still waiting, and there are four still waiting. That's a message to those again. Will you get truth? Will you get justice? And sometimes you get partial truth, not the whole truth. And that's the final piece, was this commission on the legacy. And we should have been stronger on that in the way that Colombia has been, and we have worked closely with the jurisdiction for peace and justice in Colombia. We've brought the judges here and many of those involved, and we've learned a lot. But you learn again from each other, from these exchanges that you mentioned earlier, of how to do it.

So, we've had multiple approaches to this, and as Chief Commissioner of Human Rights, I believe that we should have had accountability a long time ago and called for it through investigations. Not all that would lead to prosecutions, but at least much of it would lead to what happened. And the victims and bereaved families would then get to know the facts, which they never did. And that's all starting to come out now, slowly, slowly. And even today in the newspaper, I have been reading an article that the sex abuse on both sides is now starting to drip out, because there was a silence, a frozen watchfulness that you didn't talk about those things. You didn't say it. You were too nervous. Like the families that disappeared, but it is coming out and so a bit like Spain, you shouldn't ask people to forget, which they were asked to do after Franco, because people don't forget.

JC: The challenge of memory and dealing with the legacy of the past is critical in any conflict, you can imagine. So, people come to observe how Northern Ireland dealt with it, and as you're saying, Northern Ireland struggled to deal with it, and it continues to do so.

MM: Yeah, patience, perseverance, persistence, mostly by the victims themselves, but also, finally, governments, British and Irish, recognising that they had a duty of responsibility and accountability. And painful as it is for the veterans who were the soldiers, and painful as it is for the combatants, there are things that need to be said. I think apology is very powerful, and we saw that from Prime Minister Cameron, because those victims felt implicated.

I remember attending the Widgery tribunal in Coleraine because I went to school there, and it was a farce, and it made the victims feel worse that they were ever calling that a tribunal in the first place. Then they did it right by having an inquiry, and victims finally feeling that that burden had been lifted off them. And likewise, now I think we need to lift more and more burdens, day by day.

People know who are responsible for lifting those burdens, but they do not want to be seen weak. I'm now working with paramilitaries and the ending of paramilitarism, 27 years after the peace agreement was signed, and I have to say there's a level of macho masculinity attached to this. “I can't be seen to be weak, and there was a status attached to who I was, and I don't want the other side to feel that we committed human rights violations.” Yes, you did. And if you expect government to admit to that and acknowledge it, then combatants have to do so, but that's always the last thing that has to be attended to in a peace process.

JC: I want to turn back to this idea of the learning people engage in from the experience of Northern Ireland and you've both mentioned at different points the way in which there have been lessons to pick up on. And can I turn to the very act of bringing people from other contexts to Northern Ireland, and Clem, you facilitated many such a visit. How do you actually go about putting together a visit? So, when we've come to speak to you and said, “Clem, we're interested to bring some people from the South Caucasus or from the Philippines or from Kashmir to learn about Northern Ireland, because we think it might help them back home.” What's been in the forefront of your mind in arranging how to facilitate that learning?

CM: Well, the first thing I would have always started with, or would start with, is, what are the issues for you in your country? What… and I would work probably with one of your staff or whoever it might be involved in instigating the idea of coming to Northern Ireland, and say, “What is it that they need to know? What is it that they have a problem with that we might be relevant to?” Because there's so much complexity in Northern Ireland and so many elements of it that you could learn from, either because we made a mistake or because we did it quite well. I would then say, “Well, how can we address that issue?” About cultural rights or about victims or whatever it might be, and then try and put together a programme for them which would cover those dimensions. So, I would always try and do it, not about this is a Northern Ireland peace process, but here are people that are relevant to the issues that you're concerned about. And I would, by and large, not have tried to put together a panel so that they would discuss with a

number of people and get different views. Because when you do that, you end up with a sort of lowest common denominator, should I say. It's much better, I think, if they see people from different elements, and they can say as much as they want, and as strongly as they want, about what matters to them, and then they see someone else who maybe presents a different view, rather than coming together and trying to get a moderately lukewarm view.

JC: But I think it can be very powerful when you go into Stormont and you meet Martin McGuinness, John Alderdice, representatives of different parties, or if you go to the Shankhill or Falls Road, to some of the community activists.

CM: Or the Women’s Coalition.

JC: Well, I remember meeting several of your colleagues with groups and one on one. I mean, David Irvine was a very powerful meeting. One on one, people really felt able to tell their stories. Whereas, as you said, if you had a panel, people would be jockeying off one another. And I think it was quite important for people from other contexts to hear an unadulterated: “This was my position. This was my experience”.

MM: The best learning I got from that was being taken to South Africa, and we were brought to military camp. We didn't even know where we were going and told that we couldn't be in communication with anyone for the next three days, and we had to sit down and listen to the ANC, Mandela's people, to Buthelezi’s people, to De Klerk’s people, to the Afrikaan people. And it was remarkable because we sat and listened and they talked and they said, “We don't expect you to do it the way we've done it, but there are things that you might hear.” And we talked about everything, about weapons, about transition, about how difficult it was for them to come through theirs. Mandela said, “You've brought apartheid to South Africa. You're all Christians, you're all white, you all speak English, but you really do hate each other.” And he also said, “You know part of your problem is you don't know your problem.” And those were the things we needed to hear. Because in many ways, if they had succeeded in coming through their transition with all the problems of apartheid that they had faced, and with the problems that you know, the white government were facing, ours was minuscule. But you know, it doesn't matter how tiny or big you are when it's your own neighbours. And that really changed us, three days that I feel really changed us because we listened. And that's why the power of exchanges.

CM: In any of the meetings that I would have been involved in, we built in quite a lot of time for them to discuss among themselves what they were hearing. And I mean, I would often facilitate those meetings, and I needed to be careful that I wasn't trying to promote a message in those discussions. But I would try to ask critical questions to help them to think through: “Where is that person coming from, and why is this important what they're telling you?

JC: But I think it's so important think about how you structure these visits. I can remember on many of the visits, we'd sit people down at the beginning of the day and explain who they were seeing, why those individuals are important, and then at the end of the day, making sure you create time for people to process what they've heard. And it's that structured, collective

processing, rather than just letting people go off shopping and not think through what they're hearing.

MM: I think it's important about the chemistry. You mentioned individuals coming together when David Irvine was alive, sadly now deceased, and great leader whose voice is really sadly missed. And myself and others would do talks with the people that you were bringing and to hear how different our backgrounds were, and yet, how close we were in trying to make it work, and watching that chemistry is really important. And I think the fact that they came to see leaders who were once enemies now refer to themselves as opponents, political opponents, or people we have to work with, was an important message. But it's funny that people take away peace walls as the visual reminder of separation. And yes, it's true, we still have too much segregation, even in this area where this podcast is taking place, is a completely segregated community.

And I make a final point here. Where did we make mistakes? Of course, we made mistakes, and it's important to tell that to other people, just don't look at our successes. And there have been many. The most important is that people are alive now who might have otherwise been killed had we not made the agreement. But we did make mistakes, and one of them was not to implement that by monitoring it and bring in oversight. And I think Colombia have done that in terms of giving it to a third party, which is Notre Dame University, and they have a matrix, a peace matrix, and they work through every part of that agreement, and they look at the timetables and say that's not completed yet, and this needs to be done by such and such. And that gives people a hope that there is an international oversight mechanism. And we didn't do it. We could have done it ourselves, and we didn't even do it. And we didn't have a validation committee, an implementation. So, for some things, we had timetables. Prisoners got out after two years. There were conditions, the reform of policing. There was a quota, affirmative action for that, not for women, but for Catholics, which is now gone because there was a sunset clause of 10 years or 30%. So that was all good, that those benchmarks were included, but the Bill of Rights for which I was responsible as Chief Commissioner in drafting is still gathering dust, I was responsible with my commissioners to offer the advice.

JC: I wonder, as we reach an end of this conversation, you've shared so many lessons from the Northern Ireland experience. Is there one lesson that you would really want people to take home from what Northern Ireland has gone through as the process of peace here?

CM: It’s not so much a message for the people in conflict, it's a message for the people who are trying to help them out of conflict, because the people in the conflict know it. People don't want negotiations, are uncomfortable with the idea that negotiations will work. It's safer to stay in your own silo. And therefore, what you're doing is trying to work out how to nudge people to a point where they can feel that negotiations is possible. And I fear that very many people who try to help in situations, they either try to coerce the parties, force the parties to the table, or they come up with a proposal which they can't get them to accept, rather than working with the

parties and say, “What is it you need here? What does the other party need here? How can we bring all those together in a process that works for all of you?”

MM: Get away from the big man fixing it. It's very simple. And find interlocutors, trusted interlocutors. Now that's going to be hard in the wars we're talking about, but they are there. Pick up the phone in a crisis, to speak to somebody on the other side, find someone on the other side and say, “This is how it looks to me. How does it look to you?” So, bring a different lens. I was a wiser person for talking to people that I didn't agree with, because they would say, “Well, here's it how it seems.” And I'd say,“ I hadn't thought of that. Thank you.” And I would go back and say, “We need to take this and redraft it.”

JC: It's very hard in this day and age, to really listen to your opponents and to have a sense of respect and understanding why people are standing where they're standing, so that point of actually being able to reach out and hear from people directly.

MM: Completely. And can you believe Jonathan, that we are invited to go to the United States as political parties, because we're now together. There's another good thing. All of us who were at the table, including those who weren't at the table, but then later came on board. We now meet every three months. I call it the Group of Elders. It's actually known as the Rostrevor Group. Quietly, we don't, you know, make it public. And it was we started meeting five or six years ago after Brexit, when the assembly was down to see what each one of us could do to help the progress of the peace process. And we are now still together. And there was a view that to be asked to go to Congress to talk about how you address polarisation. How do you walk across the aisles? How do you speak to your opponents? How do you find common interest? Well, think about it, where we were during the conflict and where we are now. So that's quite… you might find that ironic and sad, but for us, it's also a lesson that we can actually have something to say to others that are so polarised in a place like the United States.

JC: If we reflect back on your years of involvement, and you've both committed your adult life in one way or another, to the process of peace here at this very difficult moment in global history, what gives you hope when you think about the process of peace here in Northern Ireland?

CM: I believe that the process of negotiation works, and that we get back to that again eventually. We overreach ourselves, but an awful lot of suffering, an awful lot of damage is done in the process. So, it will shift back, but untold harm will have been done in the process of getting back to that. But it won't stay like this. We’ve had horrible periods in history before, and then people have rediscovered that you need to negotiate and live with your neighbours, your opponents, and then they begin. But the cost of learning that lesson is huge. And there's people in the world today who are very far from learning that lesson yet, but they are learning the limits of what they can do by force.

MM: Hm. Hope. I remember in the Balkans them saying, “Give me something more than hope. “And I suppose it's practical things that you need to put in place, and that is step by step. Integrated education. It's not the entire solution, but we should be much further down sharing

the learning of young people. So, I put all my eggs into a basket working with the next generation, and they're also the vote deciders on the constitutional issue. But that's not the reason. The reason is because I hope they get a different upbringing than us, and I think that's important, especially when I look at my own fellows now, my own children, that generation are thinking very differently. “Where's the jobs? Am I getting a good education? How much debt will I have? When you guys are all stuck in identity politics, we're talking about bread and butter.” And that was a hard sell for me and as a party-political person, oh, I'd like you to think of bread-and-butter issues, and the door would close because identity was all they cared about, whereas it's a much broader, broader discussion now. And I'm involved in a thing called Politics and Action in schools, because our schools are still segregated, but what we're doing is twinning schools on either side, and particularly working class kids who don't get much of a chance to have these discussions with facilitators. And as that snowball gathers and gathers and gathers, those kids are going to be so much more politically educated, so much more politically aware of each other than we ever were.

JC: Thank you so much, Monica, thank you, Clem, it's been very rich. Lots to reflect on and learn from what you shared.

CM: Thank you.

MM: Thank you, Jonathan.

Thank you for listening to the Peace in Action podcast from Conciliation Resources. This series was produced by Nick Bennett and Jonathan Cohen. Learn more about our work at www.c-r.org and don’t forget to follow us on social media. You can find more from this series on Spotify.