

Doing what must be done: Reconciliation and international cultural relations

Fourth Reconciliation Lecture by Colm McGivern

First of all I would like to thank the Vice Chancellor and the University for the wonderful hospitality that they have once again shown me today – my welcome could not have been better or more hearty. I would also like to thank him and Professor Pumla for inviting me to speak at this distinguished event, and following on from those who have done this before me is an intimidating, humbling and flattering experience – all at once. I'd also like to acknowledge that this is the first Reconciliation lecture since the passing of the first Reconciliation Lecturer – Nadine Gordimer, who was first in so many ways for South Africa.

As Professor Jansen has described my career and my work has been that of a practitioner and a facilitator of others – it's not usually my place to speak, or talk from the front, rather I try and find ways for others to speak, to have their voice heard and as a consequence learn more about their differences and similarities. And through that process things move forward. What this also means is that I have built a career on getting other people to do the work! And in the spirit of being an active practitioner, I'd now like to get you to do the work. May I ask you to stand up?

Ice-breaker

A good exercise, and one that demonstrates a few things to me: first of all, that you have a great Free State sense of humour, ladies and gentlemen on the internet I can tell you that a sense of humour is alive and well in Free State. Secondly, that there are only certain things that people are prepared to admit to in public. And finally, that our self-perceptions across a range of issues are often at odds with the reality.

This is an important learning point when it comes to first creating the context for peace and then reconciling differences, forgiving evils, and facing ones' own fears. Many of us believe that in our hearts we are forgiving – but at what point does that stop, and where would you honestly draw the line? And would there be a difference in your public and private views?

There are 3 basic themes that I'd like to cover tonight: first that it is people who make reconciliation happen, nothing will get reconciled unless we decide to do it. Secondly that

states and governments have a role in fostering a culture of reconciliation and create the conditions for reconciliation to occur and that the more active a state is in creating those instruments, often the faster the process of reconciliation. It's important however that Government-level interventions can happen in a context where others have paved the way – civil society, NGOs, Institutions like UFS. Building peace and embedding reconciliation is a forever evolving and developing process. As you know in South Africa, it's clear when the need for reconciliation started, but when does it stop? That's much harder to tell. And it's clear that the process is not finished here by any means. And I have a final theme- people's capability to reconcile their own differences, however stark, can be boosted by learning from others in other places – internationally or perhaps just beyond their own identity group. It's through contact with cultural and experiential difference and 'otherness', and the competing perspectives that that can bring, that friction and momentum are created and people can move forward in their own understanding and personal process.

To help flesh out these ideas I'll use some of my own experiences and examples particularly from the international work we do in the British Council of how learning from other places can bring fresh ideas to stagnant processes. I'll use some stories of 'reconciliation moments', points in time when reconciliation and its importance is brought from the background to the forefront of our consciousness; I'll try and show how these moments influence reconciliation in ways that only become apparent when we look in the rear-view mirror, and I'll focus on the role of cultural engagement, particularly international cultural engagement, in assisting reconciliation and helping us 'do what must be done'.

I've called this presentation this evening '*doing what must be done*', an adaptation of a line from a poem called Ceasefire by Michael Longley – a notable and eminent poet from Northern Ireland. I'll return to the poem later.

And as Professor Jansen has already told you, I am from Northern Ireland, the northern part of the Island of Ireland, part of the UK. It is a place of great beauty, wonderful people and terrible weather, but it's also a place that was scarred by decades of unrest, killings, bombings and shootings – known euphemistically and in some ways characteristically poetically as 'the Troubles'. The Troubles were a politically driven, religiously aligned conflict

that saw Catholics and Protestants or Nationalists and Unionists set against each other in the struggle for either the maintenance of the Union with the United Kingdom or the unification of the Island of Ireland as one political entity.

Some would say that the NI troubles began in the 1960s with the call for Civil Rights, some would say they started in the 1950s with the first modern campaign by the IRA, some point to the Partition of Ireland in the 1920s – when the UK Government ceded control of the Irish Free State after a declaration of Independence and a war for freedom. Some say the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 was the point in time – when things were [‘Changed Utterly’ and the ‘Terrible Beauty was born’](#). Many point to the Religious/Political wars of the 1690’s, others blame Cromwell, still others look back to the Norman Invasion of Ireland in the 1100s as the start of it all. I’m sure someone can trace it back to the Garden of Eden and the Big Bang! But most ‘accepted opinion’ gathers around the notion that the most recent chapter of the Troubles began with the peaceful protests of the 1960s – largely but not exclusively driven by a demand for more rights for Catholics or Nationalists, including access to better housing and employment opportunities and what was known as the Civil Rights movement. This was a movement that learned from and drew inspiration from what was happening at that time the US and of course South Africa’s struggle against Apartheid.

But does any of this complexity and heavy historical context sound in any way familiar to you here in South Africa? But of course it must. South Africa’s history has tracked along a similar path as that of Northern Ireland with similar themes emerging at roughly contiguous points: Struggle against hegemonic power, demands for civil and religious liberties and freedoms, demands for simple civil rights, struggle, a new political settlement, and the pain and liberation that comes from dealing with the past. I won’t try to teach an SA audience anything about conflict, culture, complexity and it’s challenges, but I will talk about other people and places where divisions have rocked and altered states, countries and families and to tell of some ways in which people have worked together to make things better, and to reconcile differences so that they can move on.

The Student Movement and education

I'm very honoured to be here in UFS; more than you might realise. I have enormous admiration for what you have achieved together as a University Community and how up to this moment you continue to grapple with the issues of equity, diversity and parity of esteem. I have great respect for the work that the Vice Chancellor has led, and I have been equally impressed with the student leadership here. I've spent some time with them, listening to their techniques and tactics. I'm also really interested in the parallels between their experience and mine. So the first thing I want to do is to praise the student movement.

In Northern Ireland today it is still possible for young people to grow up in single identity communities- of catholics or protestants, unionist families or nationalist, and that's largely because since the peace deal that caught the world's attention in 1997, the [Good Friday Agreement](#), Northern Ireland has in some ways seemed to have got better and better at keeping people apart. Almost as if that was the key to Peace – keep them away from each other! Of course that's not right in the long run, and it's also why I wince when I see what's happened recently here in the [school at Roodeport](#), or [Curro School](#), or other institutions.

Children are still schooled in either Catholic schools or State (largely Protestant) schools with a small but growing Integrated education movement catering for only 8% of our young people. What that means is that it is entirely possible for a young person to pass through their school days today and not meet someone from another religion. The first time that some young people can encounter someone from the other community is at College or at University – and in the past that placed a heavy responsibility on those institutions to either deal with this phenomenon or suffer the consequences, particularly at the height of the Troubles.

I admire enormously how the student leadership here at UFS is engaged with the Institutional leadership in the process of change and adaptation that's required to make this University all that it can be. I was a student leader, in the mid-1990s, at the Queen's University of Belfast at a time when that institution was grappling with traditions that were perceived by some to be sectarian and prejudiced in favour of one particular side in the NI conflict.

What was clear was the Institution needed to change, and to deal with and grip discriminatory traditions and institutional behaviours. This included the use of contentious and politically loaded symbols; traditions that seemed to favour one side and demean the other; and setting right a very bad historical imbalance in employment – in those days fewer Catholics were employed by the University and more of them were in lower paid jobs and in non-academic roles.

But all is changed. Queen's University of Belfast is a world leading institution in its own right, a member of the illustrious Russell Group of Elite UK universities and widely regarded internationally nowadays for the quality of its teaching, research and its Graduates. Every student enrolled knows that the scroll they get from the Chancellor at Graduation is worth more than the paper it's printed on, that it's from a world class and respected institution, proving that it's in everyone's interests to support the institution to grow and change. In Queen's University of Belfast it was strong, courageous leadership from Vice-Chancellor across the University as well a highly political and engaged Student Body that created the changes – which were of course sometimes painful. The cornerstone of it all was the idea of a 'neutral working environment' – an awful phrase but powerful in its realization – creating a place of study and learning and work that was representative of its place but neutral in relation to its symbols and traditions, one that stood for equality of opportunity for all and instituted fair employment practices that were ahead of their time. 'Neutral working environment was a terrible awkward phrase but it gave us just what we needed; a shared institutional vocabulary to describe the change we wanted to see.

I'm sure this example has a resonance here.

So young people meeting those from the 'other side' for possibly the first time was a major opportunity, and one spotted by the Student Movement as a way of engaging activists in positive, constructive engagement that moved issues and concerns forward. Credit has to be paid to the national bodies like National Union of Students (UK) and the Union of Students in Ireland who at the height of the conflict crafted an agreement that students in Northern Ireland could be members of both Unions simultaneously. This was years ahead of its time

in British-Irish co-operation and still stands today as one of the most visible and concrete manifestations of dealing with difference and building a reconciliation culture.

So let's hear it for the Student Movement. While the Student Movement sometimes gets the headlines for all the wrong reasons – and please do agree with me that supergluing your hands to the Vice Chancellor's car is wrong – I can show you many instances where the Movement has been brave, has talked through unspeakable issues, and has worked quietly through successive leaderships to make a real difference over the long term and play a major role in creating a culture of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and in other countries.

Northern Ireland

For Northern Ireland, the cameras, arc lights and press packs have moved away to other places. That's because Peace pertains, thank goodness. But like South Africa, it's too simple to say that it's 'job done'. That would be naïve. In Northern Ireland there continue to be challenges to the Peace, in some ways because the issue of 'the past' has not been dealt with fully. I think that Peace and Reconciliation are mutually dependent – you can't maintain one over the long run without attending to the other.

Heroes of the peace

Sometimes reconciliation needs a focal point for people to clearly see its power, sometimes it needs an inspirational figure. Sometimes those figures are obvious, and sometimes they emerge quietly and unexpectedly. Madiba was extraordinary. The Arch is too. I look to them for inspiration and I think back to what happened immediately after an explosion in a Northern Irish border town called Enniskillen on 8 November 1987. And a man you probably have never heard of called Gordon Wilson.

[In Gordon Wilson's own account of that day](#) he tells of being pushed forward by the explosion, and being in the darkness of the rubble. He felt his daughter Marie reach and take his hand in the darkness and ask him 'are you alright Daddy?' 'Yes' he said 'my arms a bit sore but I'm ok, what about you dear?' 'I'm fine she said' and then she screamed, he asked

her how she was 4 or 5 times and each time she said she was fine but she screamed and he could not understand how this could be. She held his hand tightly and said to him 'I love you Daddy' and those were the last words that she spoke. Marie Wilson, a 20 year old nurse, was one of 11 who died in the Enniskillen Bombing that day, 8 November 1987. Sixty three were injured; many have never recovered from their wounds.

A matter of hours later, in a TV interview that shook lives across Northern Ireland Gordon Wilson spoke about those who killed his daughter. He said he 'bore them no ill will at all whatsoever', and that he hoped that 'he had the grace to continue to do so'.

This was one of the most poignant and affecting moments of the Troubles, and a turning point. As families gathered round the evening news and watched the replayed pictures of the blast site, the rescue operation, the rubble, in the little town that everyone knew, Gordon Wilson's superior strength of forgiveness rocked the country more than any bomb explosion could have. He said his daughter was 'A was a great wee lassie, she loved her profession. She was a pet. She's dead.' And he bore no ill will to those who had killed her.

I remember seeing this interview on the evening news with my parents, almost too young to comprehend the gasps in our house at what he said. I remember a discussion about what we would have done faced with this circumstance, in the immediate hours after this atrocity, and I remember my father shaking his head and saying 'that man gives us all hope'.

Wilson committed the rest of his life to the pursuit of peace, he worked at community level with youth in Northern Ireland and internationally, he wrote a book, Marie, and he continued to do bold things – After another IRA bombing in 1993 killed 2 young boys in Warrington in England, Wilson again courted controversy by meeting with the IRA to make a personal plea for peace. [But he reported sadly:](#) "They listened, but they made no change in their position. Perhaps it was naive of me to imagine that because it was me they would. I went in innocence to search for what my heart told me might be a way forward. I got nothing."

But I think he had 'got something': His immediate response to the murder of his daughter followed through with a life dedicated to subtly, quietly and only sometimes publically

pursuing peace so that this might not happen again to another family, any other daughter. He did what he thought 'must be done'.

In 1997, ten years after the bomb, and sadly 2 years after his death, the Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams apologized for the bombing.

Gordon Wilson did give us hope and taught us that we can do what must be done. He played an enormous part in first capturing attention for the power of reconciliation, its liberating force, its potency in one's personal life, but he also worked steadily to contribute to the peace building movement and the reconciliation culture that created the conditions for change in Northern Ireland. He did live to see the first IRA Ceasefire, called in 1994, not long after that day he had met with the IRA and thought he 'got nothing'.

Doing what must be done

'Doing what must be done' is an adaptation of a line from a poem [Ceasefire](#) by Northern Irish poet Michael Longley. It was published in the Irish Times newspaper three days after the first IRA ceasefire in 1994 – not with foresight, nor by coincidence, but just I think through a poet's prescience and growing sense that things were changing, that there was a desperate hunger for peace and a desire for reconciliation, whatever that meant. Beautifully, the poem does not refer to the Northern Ireland situation or the Troubles, though the title was arresting at that very moment as you might imagine.

It's a Sonnet, summarizing a famous episode in Book 24 of Homer's Iliad. As you know, the Iliad deals not with Northern Ireland, but with the ten year war between the Greeks and the Trojans during which the city of Troy, under the elderly King Priam, is besieged by the Greek armies, under their commander, the youthful Achilles, who eventually kills the King's son, Hector, and drags his body round the walls of Troy. King Priam goes to Achilles, as the poem recounts, to beg for his son's body. Achilles, moved to pity, calls a truce so that Hector can be buried by his father. The Iliad concludes with that ceasefire.

To "do what must be done," however painful, is the central theme of this poem. May I read it to you?

Ceasefire – by Michael Longley

I

Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.

II

Taking Hector's corpse into his own hands Achilles
Made sure it was washed and, for the old king's sake,
Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.

III

When they had eaten together, it pleased them both
To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might,
Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still
And full of conversation, who earlier had sighed:

IV

'I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.'
He nailed it didn't he? *'I get down on my knees and do what must be done / And kiss
Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.'*

Longley's wife Professor Edna Longley taught me at University – she would not like the fact that I have just used the phrase 'nailed it' in relation to this piece of work.

Longley's poem is important on a range of levels: It was so aptly timed that it has become as well known for that as for its beauty, poignancy and craft. It became an artistic touchstone for the moment that we all had wanted, and prefigured beautifully the hard work that lay ahead as Ceasefires collapsed, were reinstated, became Peace Processes. The Peace Process

required release of prisoners, destruction of weapons, the creation of political structures, and while not everyone did, more and more people found themselves 'doing what must be done'.

The path forward from the first IRA Ceasefire that Longley's poem captured in 1994 was not smooth one. The last twenty years in Northern Ireland has seen the place changed utterly, in places unrecognisably, for the better, but it was painful.

The Omagh bomb

The 15th August 1998 was just another day, a Saturday morning like all others as shoppers and tourists went about their business getting clothes for school, groceries for home, a dress for going out that night. At that time, the Provisional IRA and the Loyalist paramilitary groups were on Ceasefire, a process of political dialogue was underway, and in April of that year the Good Friday Agreement was signed after multi-party talks chaired by the US Senator George Mitchell.

The Agreement was truly historic, and the core of its recommendations are unchanged today despite the slow pace of change. In fact, Northern Ireland's present devolved system of government is based on that Agreement and on the principle of consent – meaning that 'for as long as the majority of people in NI wished it, it would remain part of the UK'.

The Republic of Ireland would give up a sovereignty claim on the northern part of the Island, the IRA and the other groups would give up weapons and have them destroyed – a process overseen by South Africa's own Cyril Ramaphosa – the UK government would release prisoners from the hated H-Blocks and other prisons. It created institutions, systems and structures that even 5 years previously seemed impossible to conceive of, and indeed had failed 30 years before in a crippling attempt to do the same thing in the early 70s.

Issues relating to civil and cultural rights, decommissioning of weapons, justice and policing were central to the Agreement. BUT Crucially, there was no provision for 'dealing with the past'.

The Agreement was to be put to the vote on 22 May 1998. It was a heady time, full of possibility, the attention of the world was shone on this 'impossible deal', and Northern Ireland's politicians were Global in their standing, South African in their courage and vision. Bono was involved. Of course we had seen what was happening in South Africa, and we drew inspiration from that. Support for the agreement was overwhelming – in both parts of the Island of Ireland. Some people knew it was the right thing to do, some saw a future without bombs and bullets and sectarian hatred and an end to a way of life that kept people at home in the long dark winter nights, frightened to stray in their own town or city. Others had to swallow hard, get down on their knees and 'do what must be done'. Voting yes for some was a choking experience, but one that they knew was for the best. For reconciliation to take place people had to feel able to compromise, without feeling compromised.

That made the 15th August 1998 all the more sickening. A splinter group of the Provisional IRA, calling themselves the Real IRA were opposed to the IRA Ceasefire and to the Good Friday Agreement. They drove a red Vauxhall cavalier car in to the busy market town of Omagh parking it next to the shops in the main street, some distance from their claimed target – the town's court house. Some garbled warnings of a planted bomb were phoned to a local radio station, so inaccurate that the police began to funnel people toward the red car on Main Street. It was packed with 230kg of fertilizer based explosives. At 3:10 that afternoon it was detonated – killing 29 people, injuring over 200 and shattering the peace. As you know in South Africa, a car bomb is brutal, indiscriminate. These people who died that day were from many backgrounds: Protestants, Catholics, a Mormon teenager, five other teenagers, six children, a woman pregnant with twins, two Spanish tourists, and other tourists on a day trip from the Republic of Ireland. This was the worst single atrocity in the 40 years of the troubles and it came weeks after the single greatest peace-building achievement in the island's history. That juxtaposition, contradiction was horrific yet unifying. It was the deadliest bombing ever in Northern Ireland, but it created a resolve and that propelled the cause of peace. In a situation as backward looking as this the only thing that can be done is to move forward – the future has to be better than this most horrific present.

Of course it made the sight of prisoners emerging from jail in the months that followed harder to take for some. Once again, time for 'Kissing Achilles' hand'.

Where Gordon Wilson gave us hope, and Michael Longley gave us inspiration, the Omagh bomb reminded us that the future would be full of challenges to all of us.

After Omagh

'Taking Hector's corpse in to his own hands Achilles made sure it was washed': I like that a quirk of circumstance and timing has brought great beauty like this piece from Longley to a much wider audience with a message and exhortation that gives people a framework to understand what reconciliation can mean and show how it has a resonance and applicability in a classical context. By drawing on classical references yet making it so easy for the readers to see themselves in the verse, Longley lifts the thinking about our own differences and transports them to Troy, and shows us in 14 lines that millions of other people in other places and throughout history face a similar need to get to grips with and face their own terrible problems. Is it the case that Northern Ireland suffers from a collective 'Narcissism of Minor Differences'? What can be learned from the ways in which other people have dealt with such issues in other places?

It's in this precise area – of international engagement and learning from other places – that the voluntary sector, the churches, our major educational institutions, all played a vital role in ventilating the thinking at a time when arguments were trapped. I know that in the darkest days of the Troubles it seemed that the only visitors coming to Northern Ireland from far flung countries were intrepid students on exchange. Crazy, reckless, students! From exotic places like France! Germany! Malaysia and China! The British Council facilitated many such exchanges: In a Northern Ireland context it was Language Assistants coming from Europe to teach in our schools, or University students on exchange for technical experience. In South Africa during Apartheid we didn't just have the libraries – open to anyone regardless of colour and used as places of discussion and to meet, but we had the BRUF Scholarship programme – uniformly bright young things spending some time in another country learning from it and simultaneously shaping its people. That's a very powerful action. And it's the business of the British Council.

What is the British Council?

[The British Council](#) is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. Our purpose is to connect people from the UK and other countries and therefore foster mutual understanding, build trust between people and open doors through academic advancement and cultural exchange. We are on the ground in six continents and over 100 countries, bringing international collaboration to life, every day.

2014 not only marked 20 years of democracy in South Africa but also 80 years of the British Council, and 55 years of the British Council in South Africa: our first office in South Africa opened in 1959.

Our work reaches all provinces in South Africa and spans the areas of language, education, sport as well as in arts and culture. It's updating our perceptions of our respective cultures, is rekindling old connections and enabling new collaborations between young leaders, artists, entrepreneurs, learners, and educators in South Africa and the UK.

I enjoyed every minute of the celebration of 20 years of the Rainbow nation last year; it allowed us as an organisation to reflect on how broad and deep-rooted our relationship of collaboration and exchange has become. [The UK-SA Arts Season 2014-15](#) in partnership with the Department of Arts and Culture is the largest single programme of people-to-people cultural relations ever staged between our countries, with hundreds of artists and institutions creating and working in both countries. And tomorrow with the Arts Minister we announce 40 new collaborations across all art forms between South Africa and the UK – totalling Millions of Rand in support of arts and cultural activity between our countries.

We are working [in partnership with the Department of Basic Education](#) to help them establish English as a first and second additional language in all 28,000 government schools nationwide. Our partnership means we are working with all 400,000 teachers to improve the education outcomes for the country's 12 million pupils.

Through a piece of work called [Premier Skills](#) we work with community organizations and the South African Football Association to provide coaching and classroom skills for leaders in

football from across South Africa through one of the UK's world class brands, the English Premier League. The net result is that grassroots coaches from across the nation's provinces can help their communities reach for its goals.

We host international discussions on issues of central importance to South Africa's future. This includes a major international conference we held on [Language and Development](#) and research conducted on the [value of national Creative Industries](#). This year we will host the Arts & Culture Trust Conference in Johannesburg and in 2016 we will welcome over 1000 international higher education leaders to Cape Town for our [Going Global](#) conference, the first time it will have been held in Africa.

South Africa is an immensely important country for the British Council and at the heart of what we do is sharing the UK's great cultural assets: the English language, arts and education with the world. The reason we do this is not just to encourage people to visit, study in, and do business with the UK – though this is a good set of reasons in their own right. We do it because we believe that effective international cultural relations works on a much deeper and profound level – it builds trust in the people and institutions of the UK and that's good for all our long term interests.

Trust is an intuitive precondition for reconciliation in most instances. You don't have to like someone to make a peace deal, or negotiate a resolution, or get your needs satisfied, but you do have to trust them. In negotiation parlance you must go through 'confidence building processes' to develop trust. Trust is central to our thinking about our work we've researched it quite extensively. [Our research shows](#) that those who have had involvement in cultural relations with the UK – through arts, education and English language activities - have greater trust in people from the UK: that a higher level of trust in people from the UK is associated with a higher level of interest in doing business and trading with the UK. The greater the extent of the cultural contact, the deeper the trust; the higher the level of trust the more interest the people have in doing more with and knowing more about the UK, studying there, visiting as a tourist or learning more about its arts and culture.

Trust is a [serious international business](#).

As an organisation that has thought deeply about trust and understands its importance to building peace and reconciliation we have of course [been directly involved](#) in interrogating issues relating to conflict and long-term peace building – and we’ve done this through our 80 year history, in places like:

Lebanon: where we produced [“Fighting for Peace”](#), a campaign documentary to promote peace and community cohesion. The film dealt straight on with the risk of slipping into the civil war again and used the experiences of former fighters to make the case for peace.

Also in Lebanon, this time with Jordan: we used forum theatre techniques with women in displaced or unstable communities to encourage self-expression and empowerment as part of a wider leadership training programme.

Forum Theatre is a powerful, well known tool, a tool often used in restorative justice contexts: Unlike traditional drama, forum theatre is a short play which ends typically in tragedy, and is performed before an audience that can relate to the problem. The play is then performed again, but this time the audience is allowed to stop the performance at any given time and intervene by changing events so that a solution can be found. We used this technique successfully in post Tsunami Sri Lanka - working in deeply divided and war torn communities to try and open up discussions on the differences they faced.

In South Africa, this year, we’ve worked with London’s Royal Court theatre and [12 new young South African and Zimbabwean playwrights](#) to help them bring to stage their new writing- early readings show a body of work that is incredibly diverse, and strong, with voices speaking about contemporary issues in a fresh way – sexuality, economic empowerment, the legacy of the past, masculinity and what it means to be without work. Theatre here has a proud history of facing up to contemporary challenges and we’re pleased to be able to play our part in bringing the next wave of dramas to your attention. You can hear these young South African voices on the current BBC Radio Programme [‘Writing a new South Africa’](#) –

the last edition of which was broadcast today. But go to the BBC iPlayer to listen again! And I strongly encourage you to do so.

Teaching Divided Histories

Back in Northern Ireland, and today. A Catholic and a Protestant girl swap school uniforms in a fine short film produced as part of a project to teach children about the Troubles, or war or conflict. In a pivotal and poignant scene early on the two 17 yr old girls from either side of the divided city of Derry or Londonderry switch school uniforms and see themselves and each other in the mirror for the first time.

Girls of that age do that all the time, don't they? Swap clothes, see what looks best, mix and match? But this gesture is loaded – simple but at the same time totally subversive. Courtney Cooke is from Lisneal college, in the loyalist, Protestant Waterside, on the east bank of the river Foyle; Yvonne Weir goes to Catholic St Cecilia's college – only a couple of miles away as the crow flies, but across the river in Creggan, the fortress estate of republican Bogside, once the IRA-controlled "Free Derry".

[The swap was the schoolgirls' own idea](#) for a short film, [In Peace Apart](#), in which, having changed uniforms, they walk through the city and demonstrate how their lives up to that point have been almost entirely segregated. In a small place, they have never set eyes on each other's schools, barely crossed the river Foyle to the other's side, the river forming a natural and psychological boundary. It's a great piece of work, only 6 minutes on YouTube, very imaginative, evocative and simple to the point storytelling that exposes the weakness at the heart of a divided society: That young girls and boys, men and women, have much more in common than often divides, and they're curious about each other, for all the right reasons.

The film forms part of a project that has produced some of the most imaginative and creative peace building work of recent times in a physically separated city. [Teaching Divided Histories](#) was the idea of an arts and multi-media hub, the Nerve Centre, which joined up with the British Council to mount this challenging international project during Derry's year as UK city of culture in 2013. The aim of Teaching Divided Histories is to transfer knowledge and expertise between Northern Ireland and other conflict affected societies on how the

delivery of education and learning can be developed to promote shared societies. Harnessing the potential of moving image and digital media, Teaching Divided Histories brings together post-primary teachers from across the world to draw on best practice in the international field of conflict education through the networks of the British Council, the project is giving teachers the confidence, skills and specific resources and support that enables them to explore contentious history and identity in the classroom. The international dimension to the project is key to its success – with sessions on the experiences in South Africa, Lebanon, India, and Sierra Leone.

And what the facilitators observed is instructive in its own right – that sometimes it's easier to start by teaching conflict that is distant, geographically and in time, before getting to our own.

I admire the Teaching Divided Histories project – for its robustness, its commitment to searching for lessons in other contexts, but mostly for its relevance to Northern Ireland today. Dealing with the past is still a preoccupation today: an unsolved problem.

A new deal

In December just passed, the day before Christmas [a new political deal](#) was brokered in Northern Ireland by the British and Irish governments. It didn't get much attention internationally and that's because Northern Ireland's leaders have reached the difficult phase of deep but important negotiation. The agreement they made is one that shows very clearly how dealing with the past is inextricably linked to moving to the future. Alongside a complex economic stimulus package designed to lessen Northern Ireland's reliance on UK government subsidy, there was a sizeable amount of effort devoted to dealing with the legacy of the Troubles. A number of new agencies are being created. The Historical Investigations Unit will examine unsolved murders carried out during the Troubles while the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval will provide an avenue for families to learn more about the fate of their loved ones. Perpetrators, or others, with knowledge of killings during the Troubles will - if a family gives permission - be able to give the commission information on the basis of limited immunity from prosecution.

You will recognise this approach from South Africa. There is a contrast between the reconciliation processes in South Africa – where the TRC got to work relatively soon after the new arrangements, and Northern Ireland where it's taken 20 years for official provision to be made for some process of engaging with and dealing with the past, and we have to acknowledge that it is still very raw for many of the victims of the conflict.

It's good that Northern Ireland is at last engaging with these issues through official channels, and interesting to read South African commentators' views on how the culture of reconciliation here is slipping – Archbishop Tutu has called for '[a resuscitation of the national spirit of magnanimity and common purpose](#)': Fanie du Toit from the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation points to '[a lack of political will](#)'. However one can still see remarkable moments of reconciliation – as personified by Marcia Khoza and Candice Mama, daughters of Eugene deKock's victims and how they engaged with him over years and supported his parole; the Derby-Lewis case illustrates the absence of reconciliation and a process.

International links have played their part. Over the course of the Troubles and the recent period of peace building, international cultural relations has been influential – directly and obliquely – in building trust between people, and providing fresh thinking and new perspectives on old arguments. Arts and Cultural exchange can sometimes simply offer up different ways of seeing an issue, it can demonstrate that others grapple with frighteningly similar issues, and prove that more often than not we have more in common with each other than issues dividing us. Crucially education and cultural exchange builds trust – even when the issues seem intractable. I've been in the room with young people from [Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan](#) when conventional accepted conflicts and tribalisms have disappeared – in part through facilitation, but also through what happened in break time when the mp3 players come out and earphones get shared.

In conclusion, we all have our part to play in creating a culture of reconciliation; it's best when governments are engaged and provide a superstructure: NGOs, our Universities, voluntary organisations, youth organisations, all have a responsibility and a role: and lessons from other places can be powerful and instructive. Hope, inspiration and commitment to

reconciliation can come from unlikely places and we need figures we can respect and stories we can return to when things get hard, and ‘our sadness fills the building’.

Last year was the 80th Anniversary of the British Council and we produced a publication [‘80 Moments that shaped the world’](#) to commemorate it. South Africa appears 4 times – the moments that the international panel decided on included Madiba’s release from Prison and all which that signalled, South Africa and the Rugby World Cup in 96, the discovery of the remains of our earliest ancestors at the ‘Cradle of Humankind’ 8 years ago and right at the front a [foreword, offered very kindly by Archbishop Desmond Tutu](#), which is beautifully resonant for tonight – I’ll read you a short piece:

“As I have written elsewhere, a human life is a great mixture of goodness, beauty, cruelty, heartbreak, indifference, love and so much more. All of us share the core qualities of our human nature and so sometimes we are generous and sometimes selfish. Sometimes we are thoughtful and other times thoughtless; sometimes we are kind and sometimes cruel. But democracy gave hope to South Africa, and sent a message to the world that men and women working together can reshape the world they live in peacefully, and with forgiveness.

Cultural and educational organisations like the British Council are at their very best when they stay open and reach out to make connections in places of conflict, turbulence and discord. It can be difficult, but it is right that the British Council is for engagement and against isolation, no act is unforgivable; no person or country is beyond redemption and the world needs more people to reach out to one another.”

Thank you very much for this honour tonight, Vice Chancellor. Thank you for attending and thank you for listening.

Colm McGivern

5 March 2015