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# Minister Coveney at the 2017 Reconciliation Networking Forum

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[Speech](#)

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Simon Coveney T.D. -  
26/10/17

## CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

### Minister Coveney statement at the 2017 Reconciliation Networking Forum

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A chairde,

You are all very welcome. I know the vast majority of you have travelled to be here and a special thanks and welcome to you.

This year's Forum is back in Dublin after a visit last year to Belfast. Our thanks again to the wonderful Skainos Centre for hosting us so well.

Now as a Cork T.D., I really think it's time Munster gets a turn next year but I suspect I'm outnumbered and outvoted by the Derry folk here today.

Before we begin, I want to take a moment to remember a son of that city, the late Glen Barr, who sadly passed away this week. Many of you will have known Glen well and my sympathies go to his family and all his friends. He will be long remembered for his role in bringing about the building of the Island of Ireland Peace Park in Messines in 1998, which has become such an important symbol of remembrance and reconciliation. It is a legacy to be proud of.

It is good to be here. I'm glad to have the chance to talk a bit about reconciliation and where I see things and to meet so many people who are so committed to making a difference.

I've been Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for a little over four months now. Most people seem to think that a job like mine involves much glamorous travel and exotic locations but I've seen a lot of the M1!

Travelling up and down to Belfast so much in the last few months has given me a chance to think about where we are and how far we have come.

I think there are many of you here today who feel quite disillusioned with current state of affairs and I don't blame you. I think many feel let down. Let down by politicians, let down by the system, let down by each other. I suspect that hearing talk of progress made over the last 20 years is not really where the mood of the room is.

But hear me out.

I'm not saying that the change has been enough. I'm certainly not saying that there isn't huge work still to do. However, despite how we may feel and despite all the current political challenges, we should not lose sight of the work that has been done and all that has been achieved. I mean that.

I took down 'Lost Lives' again this week and looked at October 1977 and October 1987 and November 1987. Any week, of any month, of any year, during those terrible decades of conflict would have driven home again just how much suffering and loss and pain occurred. People here need no reminder I know.

There is a lot of hurt captured in the pages of that book, a lot of hurt in the lives of the people affected and who was not affected? Of course it is going to be the work of generations to reach a point where we are a people reconciled and comfortable with our differences and our histories. But we should not lose sight of how far we have travelled already. We have decades of peace, a fragile, imperfect peace but a precious peace nonetheless.

This peace would not have happened without the building of relationships, the deepening of understanding and the reaching across the divides, carried out by those on the ground dedicated to reconciliation.

That work has immense value and has made a difference. A significant difference and it deserves to be honoured.

Thank you for your work. The lives of people on this island and on our neighbouring island are immeasurably better as a result of the work you do day in and day out.

Now we all just need to do a lot more.

I'm only half joking.

We're at a very particular, very difficult moment. I don't need to tell anyone in this room that. Politics in Northern Ireland is at an impasse and despite real and sustained efforts by politicians and support from civil society and both Governments, we have not yet had the breakthrough we need to find the way forward.

The spectre of Brexit is already having a profound impact on relationships across this island and between Ireland and the UK. That does not mean that we will allow the precious advances of previous years to be eroded. The geography is irrefutable, our history and cultures intertwined and we will find new ways to be good neighbours and friends.

Our guide in all of this will be the Good Friday Agreement, as we set out to understand the changing nature of relationships and identities and how it feels now to be Irish or British or both. How it feels and what it means to be from Ireland and to live in the UK or to be British and to live in Ireland. What it means now to be a unionist or a nationalist or something else entirely. We should not shy away from these conversations but we should have them with care as they go to the core of who we are and how we are.

So we live in interesting times.

There's a line in the Philip Larkin poem 'The Mower' which reads

*"we should be careful of each other, we should be kind*

*While there is still time."*

There is time. We should be careful of each other and we should be kind. We should think carefully about what we say and how we say it. Language – both our daily words and our heritage tongues – matters. There's nothing naïve about being careful and kind – it's how peace happens and what leaders need to do.

I don't just mean political leaders though. All the people of Northern Ireland and not just politicians, need to make this happen. Those who want a new Northern Ireland, who want to live in a truly peaceful society. Those who want to live and speak the language of reconciliation, need to make themselves heard now. Political leaders and representatives need to hear from their people and from all people, that a new and different approach to politics and society is now required. A politics of division should not be what we seek. And the people and politicians of Ireland and Britain have a part to play too.

Decades of peacebuilding, countless quiet conversations, uncomfortable conversations, so many moments of leadership, generosity and grace, all tipped the balance twenty years ago from violence to peace and culminated in the Good Friday Agreement.

That Agreement – complex, inspiring, living document that it is – would not have happened by political leadership and political will alone. It took civil society, church leaders, business people, victims, survivors, and thousands upon thousands of ordinary citizens to stand up and say "not like this and not in my name". And to make clear that a different way of doing things was what was wanted. In this, the democratic will of the people has prevailed.

But maybe we underestimated just how hard the next step was going to be.

Have we really strove since in every practical way towards reconciliation?

Maybe it was too much to think that the kind of transformation needed could be done in one lifetime, instead of being the work of generations. Maybe we left too much of the burden to people on the ground and expected more of our leaders than we would allow them to deliver.

And maybe we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves for feeling the degree of optimism that we did then – nothing would change without people who refuse to give up on a vision for a better future. Optimism fosters momentum, just as momentum allows us to be more optimistic.

We here today have to somehow, at this difficult hour, renew that spirit of optimism and hope that prevailed two decades ago. We have the blueprint, the knowledge and the experience. We will use these to find ways, some new, some tested, to reach out and rebuild relationships and forge new ones across this island and these islands.

There are practical things that can be done. Conversations started again with a fresh look at the context. A greater recognition of the necessity of reconciliation work and bettered structured support for those who are taking that work forward. A strengthened conversation on what approaches work best and a more honest conversation about the risks that need to be taken and the difficult choices that have to be made in pursuit of reconciliation.

This can't be a task for civil society alone, although you are central to it. It is too wide and important an endeavour for it not to be an aim of every school, every church, every agency, government department, political party, grassroots organisation and sports club.

I believe that the challenge of reconciliation today is in that need for renewal. It is a challenge that Ireland, as a proud co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, will strive to meet. I know you will too.

No speech from an Irish Government Minister on reconciliation would be complete without a Seamus Heaney quote so I will duly leave you with a couple of lines from his poem "Lightenings"

*"Unroofed scope. Knowledge freshening wind.*

*Roof it again. Batten down. Dig in".*

We're a bit of a storm battered island at present. But the winds of change can bring in better ways of working and living together too. These storms have a way of reminding us what matters and I believe that what matters is people.

People and their relationships are at the heart of everything we here do. If more reconciliation between people is what is needed, then that is what we will do. We have good foundations in the Good Friday Agreement and we'll batten down and dig in together and fully realise the promise of a reconciled future.

Thank you

ENDS

Press Office

26<sup>th</sup> October 2017