

GEORGE MITCHELL

The lesson the world can learn from Ireland

Education is a lifelong experience. It is always exhilarating to learn about a new topic or discover new areas of interest. Education plays a positive role in shaping a diverse and civilised global society.

But students must be ready and willing to learn. As the six-year anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement passed last week, I found myself asking what we have collectively learnt from the successful Irish peace process.

While I have always felt privileged to have been associated with it, the relevance of that historic agreement has become clearer as we face increasing global tension.

Since 1998 the agreement among the political parties of Northern Ireland has woven itself into the social fabric of the accomplished and proud societies of Northern Ireland and Ireland. But it must, at least in part, be measured by how it fulfils a primary objective: to create a lasting peace.

That result is not assured. That is why the effort now being made to reactivate the power-sharing executive is so important. For there to be lasting peace in Northern Ireland, there must be success in politics and civil society. Both power and tolerance must be shared.

To appreciate the achievement in Northern Ireland – and the extent to which we must continue to work – we must not forget that only six years ago the idea of an agreement that would carry the signatures of the leader of the mainly Protestant Ulster Unionist party, David Trimble, and his counterparts in the mainly Catholic nationalist parties, the SDLP and Sinn Féin, was regarded as fantasy. The Good Friday Agreement is now in place thanks to the dedicated work of people from all political and religious affiliations.

Despite the successes and the changing political climate in Ireland, the work of cementing a lasting peace is never “done”; it merely evolves into a

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protracted phase of reconciliation. This is especially relevant when dealing with an island that has known such historical ideological divides. Progressive peace and reconciliation programmes, conducted at the grassroots level throughout Ireland by organisations such as Co-operation Ireland, have done a tremendous job of tackling the lingering issues of intolerance.

Self-interest is ever present, indeed dominant, in all societies. It is one of the keys to understanding how an individual or a culture will react to any particular situation or challenge. When you combine this observation with the adage “All politics is local”, it is natural to ask whether local boundaries are really significant as we ponder ways to overcome problems that affect the global community.

William Sloane Coffin, the US peace activist, gave one answer to this question when he said: “It’s not them and us; it’s just us.” It may be helpful to view Ireland as a local neighbourhood that can teach other neighbourhoods how to tackle the insidious nature of internal conflict.

I often recall that the Irish have historically played a significant role in the building of America’s great cities, highways and infrastructure. It is poignant that once again we can call upon their assistance in highlighting the paths to peace-building, both globally and locally.

We must support and invest in the continuing Irish reconciliation, in part to refine the effectiveness of an increasingly vital foreign policy tool. The ability to bring peace to bitterly divided societies is an essential complement to efforts to maintain international peace and equilibrium. Societies that have historically invested large amounts of resources in waging war and defending their lands must also provide resources to sustain an unwavering peace.

A successful and comprehensive reconciliation throughout Ireland, one that thrives across generations, is a lesson for the world. It is one that could give hope to the global community and motivate others to replicate this stabilising model peace.

One of the most important personal lessons I have learnt from the Irish peace process is that hope can prevail even when despair is widespread. As hope began to guide our actions, it became apparent that the process was moving forward. People were willing to replace their daily fears and take a personal risk to engage with others from different backgrounds in order better to understand, respect and make peace with them.

I hope that people all over the world, leaders and ordinary citizens, are still ready and willing to learn.

The writer, a former US senator and chairman of the peace negotiations in Northern Ireland, is a board member of Co-operation Ireland