

## **A Peace Of Us: Episode 3 – Where is the Peace Dividend?**

Host – Jordan Kenny

Guests – Dawn Purvis, Aoife Moore

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/openlearn-ireland/the-good-friday-agreement-podcast>

Jordan:

Hello and welcome to A Peace of Us, a four-part series from the Open University in Ireland, in which voices beyond political institutions explore the impact of the Good Friday Agreement on arts, sports, the community, and tell us their hopes for the future of Northern Ireland. I'm Jordan Kenny, and in this episode we ask where is the Peace Dividend? We explore this with former progressive Unionist party MLA, Dawn Purvis, who was involved in negotiations for the Good Friday Agreement, an award-winning Irish journalist, Aoife Moore,

Jordan:

Okay. So I've got two people sitting in front of me right now. Aoife, I'm going to come to you first. Do you mind introducing yourself and telling us all who you are?

Aoife:

Yeah. I'm Aoife Moore. I am an Irish political journalist. I am currently based in Dublin, but I was born and reared in Derry City, and I have spent the last five years trying to convince people in the Republic that they should take an interest in Northern Ireland through my work.

Jordan:

And on my right is Dawn. Dawn, tell us a bit about yourself.

Dawn:

My name's Dawn Purvis. I'm a recovering politician. I was involved with the Progressive Unionist Party for many years, including during the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement. I've had, various iterations in terms of employment since then, and I currently work in social housing.

Jordan:

So in this episode, we're going to be talking a lot about a Peace Dividend, but before we get into all that, what actually is a Peace Dividend, Dawn?

Dawn:

Well, a peace dividend is what people hope will be delivered when, violence and conflict comes to an end. So Peace Dividend is not just an absence of violence. A peace dividend is where people have a say and play a part in building a new society, in creating new structures for that society and hopefully ensuring the economic growth and prosperity of that new society.

Jordan:

Aoife, what does it mean to you? A Peace Dividend?

Aoife:

I think for me and like a people of my generation - I was seven when they signed the Good Friday Agreement, and it was very much my generation, I think it was at the forefront of mind, obviously, ending the violence was the number one aim, but the ability to give children and the next generation the same opportunities, if not more opportunities than people in mainland Britain and the Republic of Ireland. So that's better access to education preventing the brain drain that we've had for so long with immigration, those sort of things.

Aoife:

And also better social welfare, mental health, it's all about opportunity. So for me, a Peace Dividend would be having more opportunities and a better chance at life than our parents, and that without the shadow of violence hanging over us as well.

Jordan:

And if we go back 25 years to 1998, Dawn, you were involved in talks around the Good Friday Agreement in your work as a politician. Tell us a bit about what the atmosphere was like and what you remember of the year 1998.

Dawn:

The beginning of the year was marred by violence. There were a number of killings took place, from December right up into the New Year. And we really worried if we were ever going to get an agreement because in January Sinn Fein - because the IRA were deemed to have broken their cease fire - were excluded from the talks for a period. Then the Ulster Democratic Party were excluded from the talks because the UDA were deemed to have broken their cease fire.

Dawn:

So there was a bit of, hokey cokey - they were in, they were out, they were in, they were out. And some of us were really concerned that it was coming to the end of the negotiations and things were getting tight. And I remember then Senator Mitchell, who'd just had a new baby son, and, you know, he'd been here since 1995.

Dawn:

He'd been here quite a number of years, and he'd set a deadline because he wanted to return home for Easter to spend time with his wife and new baby son. And so the clock started to tick away. And the countdown was on. And I remember David Irvine at a meeting with Senator Mitchell and the joint chairs of the talks saying, when this agreement comes, it's going to come very quickly. And Senator Mitchell saying to David Irvine, well if it comes David, I'll buy you a case of champagne. And David says, I'll look forward to that.

Dawn:

So that last week of the talks was intense. And I mean intense. No Unionist in the building was talking to Sinn Féin. and Sinn Féin realized, I think that the agreement was coming. It was going to be in three strands that affected all the relationships between these two islands.

Dawn:

That they had really played no part in those negotiations up until that point. And they really had to play catch up where the rest of the parties were drilling down into the detail of what we would like to see in that agreement. And we also realized at that stage that while there was a lot of issues that remained to be resolved, we would have to siphon them off into commissions. So, for example, placing hadn't been dealt with, human rights, equality, those type of issues that we really wanted to see within the agreement.

Dawn:

So when we eventually got agreement and the word came through because there was all sorts of shenanigans going on, in the last sort of 24 hours, I think, euphoria was the way that everyone felt. We were so, so excited, so relieved, and I think most of us recognized that this was the best opportunity that we ever had and the best deal that we could get at that time.

Dawn:

And also the best chance we could give Northern Ireland of moving forward. And when we had the final plenary I was sitting, I was nipping my leg, to say, remember this, remember this, remember this <laugh>,

Jordan:

Try and create like a core memory in your head.

Dawn:

Absolutely. And I was nip nip nipping up my leg, and looking around the room and trying to photograph in my brain, the people who were sitting there. And it was just phenomenal. And the buzz in the place was crazy.

Dawn:

And the hope - I think the hope more than anything else, and the excitement for what the future was going to look like. Now, we knew you were to go to referendum, on the following May, but it was just the hope and the elation and leaving that buzz to come home -

Dawn:

You were flat, really flat afterwards. It's like Christmas, the excitement, you get all the presents and you build up and then boom, you're back down like that, back down to earth with reality. And then you realize that that's when the hard work begins. That's when you have to sell this agreement to your community because there are those in the community who were completely opposed - it wouldn't matter what it said. Wouldn't matter if people were getting a million pounds each, they were going to be opposed to it anyway.

Dawn:

So that's when the hard work began. But the hope was still there I think. And I think people recognized and when you look at the referendum result - that this was the best opportunity we ever had.

Jordan:

And Aoife, you were obviously seven years old and I don't think involved in the talks. Correct me if I'm wrong?

Aoife:

Would've given it a good go. It was probably my thing as a child. But...

Jordan:

But do you remember conversations with your family or what the atmosphere was like just from a child's perspective?

Aoife:

I actually do, only because my family aren't political, but we were a campaigning family. So my, uncle was murdered on bloody Sunday by the British Army. So our family had been directly affected, by the

Troubles. And the news was always on in our house. My dad was obsessed, with the news and newspapers. It's probably no surprise neither that I'm a journalist, but, we were actually in Gaioth Dobhair in Donegal and it was raining. So we hadn't went out that day. Easter holidays or wherever - must have been all for midterm.

Aoife:

And I was watching cartoons in this rented holiday house we had, and I come into the kitchen and was given off because I said all the TV turned the cartoons off and the news is on, and it wasn't say 12 o'clock or whatever, it just cut the cartoons off in the middle of the episode to put the news flash on. And I remember my mommy looking to my daddy and saying, it must be the agreement. Like it - that must have happened. And I mind my dad running on to the living room and turning the TV up and that that for the rest of the day. We didn't do anything else.

Aoife:

We just sat and watched the news.

Aoife:

And I remember, you know, I have very like scant memories of before the agreement, but you know, you remember the British Army helicopters over the house and like if the chopper was up you knew something had gone wrong and all that sort of stuff. But other than the actual day itself, I don't really remember, you know, I remember big things too, like the day Tony Blair became Prime Minister because I remember my daddy saying, if Tony Blair becomes the prime Minister, we'll get a Bloody Sunday inquiry. So I remember going to school and saying that, to my teacher like - oh, Tony Blair's a Prime Minister and we're going to get a Bloody Sunday inquiry.

Aoife:

So it's mad - those wee things stick in your head, but I don't remember mommy and daddy going to vote or anything like that. But I remember a buzz about the house, the day it was announced.

Jordan:

This question for both of you, I suppose, but does it feel like 25 years ago?

Dawn:

Not to me it -

Aoife:

Doesn't it to me, but obviously -

Jordan:

But like 25 years for something that doesn't feel like that long – in ways, and in other ways, I suppose maybe not.

Dawn:

I think because we're still having issues, we still haven't fully implemented the Good Friday Agreement. There are still things outstanding like a Bill of Rights and, you know, cultural rights, women's participation in public life, all of those things, the involvement of civic society - because they're all still outstanding, It doesn't feel like it was 25 years ago. Plus I think because the Peace Dividend, so-called, hasn't been delivered, that people aren't being given the opportunities that AFA talked about, that we'd hoped for.

Dawn:

So, it feels like we're still back there a bit, although, don't get me wrong, society has changed more than ever in the last 25 years. And the absence of violence and the peace has been absolutely brilliant. But, in terms of what we would love to have seen delivered at that time, the innovation, the creativity, sadly is not there.

Aoife:

And I think as well for a lot of people - and it's something I have noticed because I'm writing a book at the minute and you know, a couple chapters are about the Good Friday Agreement - a lot of the same players who were there are still in politics. You know, there's still the longevity. These are people who might have been in prison like and then became politicians who were, you know, against the peace process, then for a peace process, all those people are still around. There's a very big lack of young people in politics in, Northern Ireland.

Aoife:

I think we're only starting to see a change now. You know, it was the last election that we saw the youngest ever Stormont returned. But for a lot of it, you know, it's all the same heads that are, that are back. And I think that actually does contribute - so there hasn't been a freshness in politics for a very long time.

Aoife:

And Dawn's completely right. The reason why it hasn't been implemented is because a lot of these people are very stuck in the mindset that they had then. And the reason Northern Ireland is one of the best places in the world is not cause of politicians. It's cause of the people. The reason it is, has been better and made better in the last 20, 25 years isn't cause of Stormont. It's because the people were willing to compromise and the people have made the place better because, you know, as we know now, Stormont, it's nearly more out than it's in.

Jordan:

Well, let's talk a bit about some of the people, because I suppose the Good Friday Agreement was meant to signal, I suppose, an era of economic prosperity for working class communities. Some of those that suffered the most during the conflict. Has that happened?

Dawn:

I don't think it has. I think if you look at the statistics actually, it would tell you that we're going in the opposite direction. I remember, talking about educational disadvantage amongst Protestant work class boys many, many years ago. Not just Protestant work class boys, but Traveller children and children from minority ethnic communities. And, this has been an ongoing issue from 1986 and there's been umpteen opportunities and millions of pounds meant and trying to tackle this issue. And when the census statistics came out a few weeks ago to say that almost a quarter of adults in Northern Ireland don't have basic qualifications, it shows you the legacy of not tackling that tale of educational disadvantage.

Dawn:

So we're actually getting worse in terms of educational opportunities amongst those who are most disadvantaged. The other thing that I think we should look at are health inequalities.

Dawn:

So believe it or not, after 25 years of the Good Friday Agreement, our life expectancy has dropped by a number of years. Now - we're supposed to be part of one of the greatest economies in the world. I think the UK economy ranks fifth or something in the world. We're connected to the Republic of Ireland as well, but yet our life expectancy's dropping - that's completely unheard of, you know? So educational opportunities, health inequalities, and all those measures if you like, of how our country is doing well, has shown that Northern Ireland's actually slipping, in all of those, metrics and all of those statistics.

Dawn:

So we haven't really done very well. It could be down to the failure of not having an executive. I think we've had an executive for 60% of the time over the, the last 25 years.

Dawn:

And we've had, various forms of direct rule in between those times. But that inability to plan longer term for what you'd like to see in your society, the failure to tackle, I think segregated education, segregated housing, and not be serious about reconciliation is one of the greatest downfalls I think of the last 25 years. You know, we're probably more divided as a society than ever. We've had more peace walls gone up when we thought we would be taking them down.

Dawn:

And they really are the scars of what we've done to each other on in this society. And the very fact that they're still there shows you and demonstrates that we've failed miserably to try and share this place and make it work for everybody.

Jordan:

What do you make of that Aoife?

Aoife:

I absolutely a hundred percent agree. Even in my own community - I read recently that a fifth of children in Derry live in absolute poverty. We in Derry City, in the surrounding district, we have the highest rate of long-term debt, long-term unemployment, gambling addiction, drug addiction, because they all are things that happened in my community, and I can only speak to my community and, and Derry and places where there would've been a Republican stronghold - when the IRA left and gave up the guns, drugs then flooded into work in class communities. Derry still doesn't have a detox centre.

Aoife:

We had an absolute epidemic of suicides along with, you know, this epidemic of suicides that we see in the Traveller community as well. And none of that can be tackled without an executive. And the other side of it is, look, domestic violence - the North is the most dangerous place in Western Europe to be a woman.

Aoife:

And I think, you know, there's a legacy of violence in this place that we live in, you know, a legacy of conflict. And I have always said, once you accept a certain level of violence in the street, you do accept it at home. And I do think it becomes normalized and it's a hangover. I think the rate of domestic violence in the North is a hangover from the Troubles and also the amount of post-traumatic stress and intergenerational trauma. And then that is fed by the drug addiction as well. So it's this vicious cycle of poverty and drug addiction and violence. And again, we talked about this morning about earlier about the Peace Dividend -

Aoife:

The Peace Dividend was supposed to help sort out these problems. But Dawn's right, you can't plan for anything. We don't have a proper domestic violence strategy because we can't get the budget over the line because Stormont, it's not sitting. And it will be those communities and like - Loyalist working class boys are the worst educational outcomes in Northern Ireland. So it's not to say - it's not a Catholic Protestant issue, it's a poverty issue and it's not going to get any better without Stormont. And it's, I suppose it's natural that the poor will get poorer, especially when there's no government.

Jordan:

The figure that Dawn said there - 60% of the time since the Good Friday Agreement, is all that we've had had a functioning executive -

Aoife:

The politicians at the time have made a mistake. I don't think they did it on purpose, but I think they've made a mistake in the decision that they made that one party can hold the executive to ransom. I think, the Alliance have been calling for this for a long time now - that we need to reform this agreement because this can't go on because we're at the stage now that if the DUP don't come back, we could be looking at direct rule forever until Sinn Fein hope that they can get a majority and the unity referendum. But that's no way to run a region - hoping that we might get there eventually.

Aoife:

But for now we're going to have this stick by Westminster.

Dawn:

Jordan, one of the things that was written into the Good Friday Agreement was the opportunity for that agreement to evolve, to change, to be reviewed. And I think, all of the participants to the talks recognized at that time that there were structures and safeguards included that really tied people up to the point where any policy that was going to come out was going to have to be very bland. Because as a colleague of mine said at the time, you had parties to the left of Stalin and others to the right of Genghis Khan that were going to be involved in an executive.

Dawn:

So how they met in terms of policy decisions was going to have to be in the broadest terms. So it was recognized that we needed - that the Good Friday Agreement needed to change and needed to evolve.

Dawn:

And that hasn't happened unfortunately. And if you look at our societies now, they grow in middle ground. For example, the Alliance Party dominating that middle ground. Unfortunately, we lost the Greens in the election last year, which was a real pity because we were getting more diversity into our politics, which is what we need here - but that there's a growing middle ground there whose votes don't count in the assembly. The votes don't count in the executive. There's a growing diversity within our society.

Dawn:

So we have newcomers, we have migrant workers, we have refugees and asylum seekers. You look at the last census figures about how people identify themselves, that's not reflected in our politics either. So the Good Friday Agreement has an opportunity to change. I think the structures have an opportunity to change in order to recognize how our society's changing. If you look at the life and time survey, the young survey that comes out every November, December time, there's nearly 25% of our young people who don't identify anymore as British or Irish or unionist or nationalist because they don't want to be identified as orange and green.

Dawn:

They want to be bigger than that. They want to be European, global. And, and so that's not reflected again in our politics.

Jordan:

So would you say there's too much focus on unionist / nationalist and that needs to be widened out?

Dawn:

It does, because our society now is probably much more reflective of what we would like to see in politics. And that does need to be broadened out. I'd like to come back to a point that Aoife raised about women and domestic violence because a friend of mine, Monica McWilliams, 25 years ago, she, as a professor in the Ulster University, did a very big study on domestic violence in, in Northern Ireland. And she repeated that 25 years later and because she had a, an inkling that domestic violence and sexual violence and violence against women in general had increased.

Dawn:

And her research bore that out. And she - I remember talking to her when she published it again last year, and she said she was completely horrified at the level of sexual violence now directed towards women. Wasn't just domestic violence any longer as somebody termed that - it wasn't just the slap anymore, but it was what was accompanied that.

Dawn:

And it is horrific when we look at the number of women that are dying at the hands of partners, former partners or people known to them, mostly men. What have we done in this society to educate and make - particularly young men, our own boys - what are we doing to educate our own boys that we should be valuing our women as equal citizens? And I think that's a very stark reminder of the issues that we need to address. And Aoife is right, we can only do that when we have, locally elected politicians making decisions that affect local people.

Jordan:

Violence against women is one issue. Another is gender pay gap. Northern Ireland is higher than the rest of the UK and Ireland. According to statistics, women are earning around 85% of men's earnings. Aoife - what does the picture across the island look like for women?

Aoife:

It looks like we are stuck not even 25 years ago, 50 years ago, look at abortion rights. And I know this is a North and South issue - and when you see the public polling when it comes to abortion rights, it's popular. You know it has a majority. And the thing I've often felt about abortion rights is there are a lot of people and politicians in public life who are pro-choice, but there is a cynical need to keep your seat and keep your voter base.

Aoife:

And they're not willing to say that. They're not willing to say - I trust women to make decisions with their own bodies. So if they can't get women - if we can't get politicians to say they trust women with their own bodies, what message does that send out to the wider public?

Aoife:

Why wouldn't women be disrespected in the workplace? Why wouldn't they be disrespected in the home? You know, that's what it comes back to, it's a lack of respect and a lot of it is: there's not enough women in Stormont either. There hasn't been enough women in public life. I think the thing that bothers me the most when I look back at the Good Friday Agreement, and I say this all the time, is the lack of mention that people like Mo Mowlam and Monica McWilliams and Dawn get, because women bear the brunt of every negative policy when it comes to running a state.

Aoife:

You know, as we've just talked about this, poverty affects women, poverty affects, you know, violence affects women. All that affects women so much more. And I think when it comes to women's rights here, it's not even that we're stuck 25 years ago. I feel like we're stuck 50 years ago.

Jordan:

And Dawn, as a woman who has been in Stormont and has been involved in different talks, like we've mentioned, has there been enough women around the table during various stages of the Good Friday Agreement process and other big moments in Northern Irish politics?

Dawn:

I don't think you can ever have enough women at the table and being visible in politics because we know from research that's taken place worldwide that when there is a balance of women and men or when there is a majority of women compared to men, that the policies and decisions that are made actually affect everybody and are for the betterment of everybody. So, I think it's - I think when women are invisible then we have a problem. And we've seen that and we've seen it in politics here and we've seen it in in other countries and we can point to all the examples of that.

Dawn:

So I think it's important for a number of reasons, one - that women are visible to provide the role models for younger people and particularly younger women to get involved in public life.

Dawn:

But secondly - for the policy and the decisions that come out of those boards and those executives and those other things. We know, for example - I think Forbes produce a report every number of years that that looks at the gender balance on boards, decision making bodies, et cetera. And they've proven time and time again that when women make up at least 50% of boards, if not more, that those are the companies, if you like, that survive the best, through any turmoil, any up and down.

Dawn:

And so we need to ensure that that happens. One of the things that is not taken seriously, I think, by political parties in Northern Ireland, is the need to put women into safe seats. And parties - I think there's only two parties at the minute that actually have quotas for women to get women into electable seats. And really every party should have quotas. To ensure that women get elected.

Aoife:

And can I also just make the point as well? I actually don't think anything has changed with - when the women do get into public life, the abuse that women get is very, very different.

Jordan:

This is something we've seen talked about -

Aoife:

When you're seeing the abuse that Dawn, and Monica McWilliams, and Mo Mowlam got during the peace process - we didn't have social media, but it was rampant and it was horrible. Really, to me it really shows that we have not come any way when it comes to women in public life and that will only get better with more women in public life because women are going anywhere. But women should not have to put up with a level of abuse in public life as they get - you know, Naomi Long's life has been basically milestoned by every awful attack or anything that's happened to her personally.

Aoife:

And - to me it's stark that it hasn't actually changed. The type of abuse is different. But the abuse is always there. It's always the hum in the background.

Jordan:

And to move the conversation onto something that you did mention - around ethnic minority communities here in Northern Ireland - the Good Friday Agreement, I suppose brought this term we always hear - relative peace to certain areas. But since it was signed 25 years ago, there has been a steady rise in the amount of racist attacks and incidents that we have seen here. How can we stop that?

Dawn:

We need a peace plan. We haven't had a peace plan. Our executive have failed to come up with a shared future. And we do reconciliation by looking in the mirror and saying, I promise I'll be a good Prot. I promise I'll be a good Catholic. We don't mix, you know, we still don't have those opportunities because of segregated education, segregated housing. If we had a peace plan that was based on bringing people together, ending segregation, celebrating diversity, you would probably see a reduced number -

Dawn:

I'm not saying we would eradicate any form of hate because it's impossible to do, because people are ignorant. They will just, they will hate. And it is about education and awareness. but we would be much further on than more we are now.

Dawn:

I live in South Belfast. It's the most diverse constituency in the whole of Northern Ireland. And it's great. And I see so many different nationalities, people from different races and backgrounds and the stuff that takes place is just tremendous. But that should be replicated right across Northern Ireland. But because we fail to tackle issues of difference amongst ourselves, then other forms of hatred will also take place. I mean, I heard a statistic last week that sectarian attacks have now been overtaken by racist attacks in the forms of reported hate crimes to the PSNI.

Dawn:

Why are we replacing one form of hatred with another? We shouldn't be doing that. We should be tackling forms of hatred. We should be addressing those. And we need to start early and we need to start at school.

Jordan:

And Aoife, what's your take when it comes to stopping, these racist attacks?

Aoife:

I think not surprising, that we've seen - with an increase of ethnic minority people, we've seen an increase in attacks because we have spent the last 50 years, saying, this isn't your place, this is mine. We are so - our history is keeping each new people away from us. Difference is bad and therefore you can't be here with me. I think as well the notion - we're talking about integration. So I never met another Protestant my own age until I was 16.

Aoife:

I went to a Catholic primary school, I went to Catholic secondary school and I lived in a Nationalist estate. Played GAA and went to Irish dancing. Where was I going to meet a Protestant? Because, and I'm from Derry, which, you know, would be more nationalist now, but not in any way like it used to be. But I am completely sure that there are children in my estate who will grow up the same as me, who won't meet a Protestant until they start going out to bars - in 2023 start going out to bars or get a job somewhere in the town.

Aoife:

And then they'll meet a Protestant in the town. And that's not good enough.

Dawn:

I think it's very sad that Aoife's experience of meeting a Protestant is reflective of mine and meeting a Catholic, because I didn't meet a Catholic until I was 15.

Jordan:

And this is, you know, years of difference!

Dawn:

There's decades, decades apart. And it shows you that we really haven't changed that much when it comes to that, which is why - and it is, Aoife's right, this is a class issue. Because if you have money you can choose to integrate, you can choose which school your children go to.

Jordan:

To talk about something which we hear a lot about, Brexit, and no matter what way you feel about it for years, the Peace Dividend would, be heavily linked to Europe. There was Peace Funds etc. making a huge difference to quality of life here. Would you say throughout the whole process of Brexit that the Good Friday Agreement has been a major protector of rights and interests for of people in Northern Ireland?

Dawn:

I think we haven't seen the full out-workings of that yet. And I think there's still a fear that rights and gains will be lost or diluted through the Brexit process. I know certainly because of the European Peace funds, because of the European structural funds groups and organizations here who wouldn't have access to different opportunities were given opportunities because of that. I also think that the border had become irrelevant. People were no longer talking about the border and then Brexit comes along and it's like a game of pin the tail on the donkey, where's the border going to go?

Dawn:

You know, we'll have all this argument. Is it going to go in the Irish Sea, is it going to go back between North and South? And we all knew that the border was going to have to go somewhere. And I think parties who were campaigning for Brexit were probably - to give them the benefit of the doubt, they were probably very naive as to where they thought this was going to end.

Jordan:

What about Aoife? What do you think the role of the Good Friday Agreement's been through the Brexit process?

Aoife:

I think we have had so much good grace from Brussels. I think Brussels - they haven't always covered themselves in glory, but I think the European Union did as much as they could with a very, very tense relationship, and a number of, I would argue catastrophic, badly advised, British Prime ministers. British Prime ministers, I say would probably sit in stark contrast to Tony Blair and even David Cameron in how lacking in their knowledge or care they were towards the North.

Aoife:

We do not need to say in this part of the world how ridiculous the entire Boris Johnson saga was or or Liz Truss. But I was taken aback by the - we have always known that Dublin doesn't fully understand this and London doesn't fully understand this, but for me as a young person whose life is immeasurably better, you know, because of the Good Friday Agreement, I'm the first person in my family to go to university and, and all that.

Aoife:

And I live on the border as well. So obviously it's all very personal to me. But I was taken aback at the stark lack of understanding from people who were paid to know better. I don't expect people in Yorkshire to understand the ins and outs of the Irish border. But the paid politicians in Whitehall, who didn't even have a clue, I believe it was Gavin Williamson said that he had never read the Good Friday Agreement even because he couldn't get time. It's 18 pages! He's paid to understand this place.

Aoife:

And it, to me, I thought - and this isn't how I feel, but all I thought at the time was if you were arguing for United Ireland, there is no better advertisement that London doesn't care about you as what happened with Brexit.

Jordan:

How much of a threat to the peace process is not having a government here in Northern Ireland?

Aoife:

I think it's a huge threat. I think people will get more and more disenfranchised. We know that violence is actively linked to poverty. If we can't bring out our own budget, if we can't use the millions and millions that are sitting in a bank account that we can't get to our exchequer because we don't have a sitting assembly - if we are letting civil servants take the reins here, they don't - not necessarily they shouldn't, but they also don't want to, that's not a level of responsibility that these people want to have.

Aoife:

And nor should they. I think we will see the poorer this place gets - and we are in the throes of a cost of living crisis - We will see more people relying on money lenders. More people falling into addiction traps, higher rates of gambling. Society will get worse.

Aoife:

And when society here gets worse, the risk of violence gets higher. You know, where I'm from - and Dawn can speak to the other side of it - but where I'm from, you know, we are seeing dissident Republicans feeling emboldened. It was only yesterday that they said that the terrorist risk in the north

has been increased. And that's because, these are Republicans who prey on young people in my community - are saying to them, well, they don't care. London doesn't care about you and Stormont doesn't care about you. Stormont doesn't work. That's the way they sell it to these young people.

Aoife:

Stormont doesn't work, you don't have a job. Your ma's on the dole. Your addiction problems, all this - like, what have you ever got out of Stormont? That's how they use these young people. And I know it works the same way with Loyalist communities. So without Stormont, the risk of violence is always going to be higher because these people feel emboldened because the people, the choir that they're singing to is eating it up because what they're saying is right, your life is getting worse - and why wouldn't you then turn to violence, turn to crime? Because if that's the easiest way for you to get money or get an opportunity, that's what you're going to do.

Jordan:

Aoife - can progress truly be made, do you think, within the current Stormont system?

Aoife:

I wish I could end on a positive note. I'm 32, and I have never felt so negative about the state of politics in Northern Ireland as I feel right now. We at this stage - and things could change for the time this podcast comes out - but at this stage it does not appear that the DUP are willing to go back to Stormont. And if that is the case, I don't see any other way other than the reform of Stormont. I don't think direct rule advantages any community in Northern Ireland.

Aoife:

I don't think anyone wants it, including the DUP - I mean they said that, but if this is it, it can't be it. There has to be a reform and it, does not mean dismantling the Good Friday Agreement. I don't think anyone is suggesting that. And I saw Bertie Ahern at the last committee, you know, the former Taoiseach saying, oh, I wouldn't be rushing, you know, to make these reforms.

Aoife:

But it's very easy to say that when you live in <inaudible> in Dublin and you're not sitting in Sandy Row and you need active help now, and you need active change now. So I don't - I think if nothing changes in the run-up to the Good Friday Agreement anniversary and nothing changes in the next couple months, I do not think the people of Northern Ireland should sit and wait till December for another election. The polls are showing the next election isn't going to be very different. The results aren't going to be very different. It's forcing people into a more divided and more divisive atmosphere.

Aoife:

So I think the only way to do it now is, to reform Stormont.

Jordan:

And Dawn what is your take, can progress be made within the current Stormont setup?

Dawn:

I think we're going to go through some more of that for a wee while. I don't see the Secretary of State rushing to make any changes to the makeup of Stormont or any serious reform at the minute, I think the pressure remains on the DUP and I see the DUP increasingly isolated around this, which potentially could push reform a lot quicker than we think. I think the Secretary of State has recognized that it's unacceptable that we have a democratic deficit here and they certainly want to see it up and running.

Dawn:

I don't think there's any desire for joint rule, although Sinn Féin would certainly like to see that and increasingly pointing at a Northern Ireland, that's ungovernable really, as evidence of why joint authority should be introduced. But I think the last 25 years - whilst it's been up and down -

Dawn:

I think we'll go through some more of that. There'd be more up, there'd be more down. And it's probably taken a while for some politicians to realize that you're going nowhere without me and I'm going nowhere without you, and we've got to make this place work. So I am probably a wee bit more hopeful, for the future because sometimes when you are backed into your corner, you realize that there's nowhere left to go.

Dawn:

And I think that's happening at the minute. So I'm hopeful that there will be reform, not in the medium term, but a recognition that this society has changed and that our political institutions have to be reflective of that change in the future. So I'm hopeful that things will change -

Aoife:

Because you've seen the impossible happen before.

Jordan:

Dawn, Aoife, thank you so much for joining us on A Peace of Us. This has been really insightful and really interesting. Thank you.

Jordan:

That's it for this episode and there's lots more to explore on our OpenLearn hub, which features music, art, and a series of guest essays. Search OpenLearn Good Friday Agreement online to find it. Thanks for listening.